

## The Healing Time

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Summary: After Lois's wedding to Lex Luthor collapses in disarray, can Clark help her to recover her equilibrium?

### The Healing Time

I've always thought that, in the show, Lois seemed to recover far too quickly from her broken engagement and the shock of finding out that her fiancé was a villain; her friendship with Clark and Superman also seemed to be restored very easily. A number of authors have, in passing, referred to Clark helping Lois get over her pain, and for a long time I've wanted to write a story showing just how they worked through it together. This is that story, though it ended up much longer than I originally intended, and also contained elements I'd never intended to include; I blame certain posters on Zoom's Message Boards for that! You know who you are, and I thank you all for your support, enthusiasm and encouragement during the writing of this story.

The plots of three episodes are utilised in this story (Madame Ex, Wall of Sound and The Source); I should point out here that I have taken a number of liberties with the A and B plots of all three episodes. This is principally for my own convenience, though also because, given the different route this story takes, because part of the plots just wouldn't have fitted in the context. I've also altered slightly a piece of information from Virtually Destroyed.

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Any comments, as always, very welcome at [w.m.richards@hrm.keele.ac.uk](mailto:w.m.richards@hrm.keele.ac.uk)

The Healing Time

Clark flew slowly back to his apartment; he wanted to get home so that he could wash the smell of burning oil off himself and his Suit, but at the same time he was not looking forward to spending the evening alone with his own thoughts. He still wasn't sure that he had done the right thing with Lois that afternoon. It had been sheer impulse brought on by terror: one minute they had realised the Planet would re-open after all and they had been gazing in wonder at the globe which had just arrived to be reinstated in pride of place over the entrance, and the next they had been gazing at each other. Their eyes had met, and held, and it had been obvious to him that Lois had been remembering the last civil conversation they had held, some weeks earlier.

That conversation when he had bared his heart to her. When he had told her that he loved her.

And she had told him that she cared about him, but as a friend. Then she had said she wanted to see Superman.

And, after he had rejected her as Superman - mainly in revenge - she had agreed to marry Luthor. And his world had fallen apart.

Well, the wedding hadn't happened; Luthor was dead; Lois was still a free woman; and they would be working together again very soon.

And all of that was great, except....

Except that, he had remembered suddenly, Lois knew that he was in love with her. How could they go back to being friends with his declaration lying between them?

And... he had realised something else. It wasn't just that he had been the first person she had asked for when she had emerged from the LexCorp building with Perry - though that had warmed his heart. The expression in her eyes that afternoon, in front of the Planet, had seemed to suggest something about her feelings for him and he hadn't been quite sure what that was. It had looked almost as if she cared more for him than the friendship which she had insisted was all she'd felt. But... it was barely forty-eight hours since her wedding to another man had collapsed amid chaos as the police had burst in to arrest Luthor. Clark wasn't sure just how much Lois knew about his own part in the affair - would it bother her that he had been largely responsible for proving her almost-husband guilty of heinous crimes?

And even if that wasn't important to her, was she really in control of her own feelings at the moment? If she had been about to suggest that she did feel more for him, was it just a rebound reaction? Was she simply building up her relationship with her best friend into something more because she was looking for security, someone to cling to after her life had fallen apart?

Clark had therefore made the split-second decision to deny his own feelings for her; to lie and say that his previous declaration of love had been a lie. Wrong it certainly had been, but as he landed softly on his balcony, sighing, he admitted that it had probably been justified. He couldn't have borne starting a relationship with her now, only for her to end it all within a few weeks because it hadn't been what she wanted. If that happened, it was highly likely that their friendship would be destroyed irrevocably.

And most of all, right now, he wanted his best friend back. Even if he couldn't have her as a lover too. It looked as if their friendship, which had gone through such a rocky few weeks, was salvageable. After all, she had run to him outside LexCorp. She had clung to him as Lex's body had hit the pavement. And although he had left her with her mother shortly afterwards, she had wanted him to take her home. Today, she had behaved with him almost as if the intervening weeks had never happened.

Yes, he was incredibly lucky not to have lost her friendship for ever, particularly considering the way he had behaved towards her after she had accepted Luthor's proposal. It wasn't just that he had refused to attend her wedding - Jimmy and Perry had also declined their invitations. It had been his attitude to \*her;\* the way he had broken off all contact, and been abrupt with her when she had made contact with him. And especially that day when she'd been driving that car; he remembered his scornful words to her:

'You're an investigative reporter, Lois - \*investigate\*!'

He had then stalked off, knowing that he had hurt her.

Yet she seemed to be prepared to forgive his behaviour; his jealous outbursts and those remarks which, he knew, had inflicted pain. He was grateful for that. He had been hurt by her behaviour, her dismissal of his declaration of love, but that had really not excused his treatment of her.

So if they were going to carry on working together, he had to revoke his words of love. Otherwise their relationship couldn't be anything other than awkward. So he had been right to do it, he insisted.

If only he didn't feel so depressed about it.

But he had to push such thoughts from his mind, he told himself. He couldn't afford those sort of regrets. And his own feelings would simply have to be put aside for the moment, anyway. Lois would need his friendship - at least, he hoped she would. She had been through a hell of a lot in the past few weeks, and he suspected that very few people would understand how it had affected her. One of the things he had learnt about Lois in the nine or ten months he had known her was that she was very good at hiding her real feelings. She might appear to be fine; but inwardly, he was aware, she would be suffering.

Unless she could find an outlet for that suffering, she might never recover from it. And he was determined to ensure that didn't happen. She needed a friend; someone she could rely on to be there for her. If she would let him, he was determined to be that someone.

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Letting herself into her apartment, Lois looked around her with a resigned sigh. The place was such a mess; she had only just been allowed to take her boxes and bags back home after the police had been through them, and she hadn't had time to unpack anything yet. Lex had had all of her stuff packed up and moved across to his penthouse a couple of days before the wedding, and she herself had

moved into the guest suite.

It had just been fortunate that the lease on her apartment hadn't expired yet and she had been able to move back in; the landlord hadn't yet signed up another tenant and had agreed to let Lois return. Not that she'd known much about that process; her father had dealt with that side of things. It was funny, she mused; she hadn't seen her father in months - he hadn't even come to the wedding. But once the news got out about Lex's disgrace and death, Sam Lane had come straight over to find out what he could do to help. It had been a relief to hand over the legalities and paperwork to him.

Her mother had been great at first, as well, but the day after the wedding-that-wasn't Lois had felt a need to be on her own again. Ellen had protested that she could stay around to help Lois unpack her stuff again, but Lois had insisted. So Ellen had left to return to her upstate home, and shortly afterwards the police had sent Lois's belongings over in a cab.

She hadn't felt like starting that task last night; even now she wasn't keen. Any one of those boxes could hold memories which she had no wish to revisit. There were photographs of herself and Lex; presents Lex had given her; clothes he had bought her - her wedding dress was there somewhere too. The police had asked for it, in order to run some sort of tests on it; exactly what evidence they had expected to get from a wedding dress Lois had no idea. Unless they thought it might have been stolen; she supposed, with what she now knew of Lex, that anything was possible.

And there were other things, other memories, in those boxes which she didn't really want to reopen right now. Like Clark... she had at least one photo of him, not that she really knew why she'd kept it. And there was that bear he had won her at the Smallville Corn Festival.

But she didn't want to think about Clark right now either. Not after this afternoon.

And there was Superman... all of her Superman memorabilia was buried in one of those boxes too, including her treasured photograph of the two of them together. Jimmy had taken it, one moment sometime when Superman had been a little off guard; they had been talking somewhere semi-private, and in the photograph it seemed almost as if he was gazing into her eyes. Unlikely, she knew; but she loved that photo. Had loved it... before the night Superman had told her, those same eyes of his cold as ice, that unless she had a lead-lined robe she might as well not bother covering up. He had made her feel cheap. And he had rejected her love for him, told her he didn't believe her.

Were all the men in her life worthless? Was she destined always to choose the wrong man?

But she wasn't going to think about that right now, she resolved firmly. The good news was that her life was back on track. Her marriage, which she'd had second thoughts about even before walking down the aisle, hadn't happened; she was glad she'd had the nerve to say no even before the police arrived. The Planet was going to be rebuilt, thanks to Franklin Stern - and if she'd understood the garbled story Jimmy had told her correctly, the insurance policies

had paid out after all and Stern should be able to sue Lex's estate for the money, which should give the Planet a good financial cushion.

And she would have her job back. So would just about everyone else who wanted it, Perry had told her later once he'd finished his discussion with Stern. Clark would come back, of course; Lois had been surprised that someone with his talents hadn't found another reporting job in the interim. He'd turned down her offer of a job at LNN; she'd put that down to his jealousy and irrational dislike of Lex at the time, but she supposed that in any case Clark preferred newspapers to TV. But it looked as if he hadn't bothered to apply for work with the Star or any other Metropolis newspapers, let alone anything in any other city. That was puzzling; and it wasn't as if he'd spent all of his time investigating Lex, either. That had only really taken off after Perry had returned, it seemed. At least, so Jimmy seemed to think.

So what had Clark been doing...? And, come to that, why had he expended so much energy in discrediting Lex? Simply to prove that he'd been right all along? But if that was the case, why hadn't he said 'I told you so'? Because he hadn't; he'd had two chances so far, and hadn't taken either of them. Because he really was jealous, and had wanted to stop the wedding? That had been plausible up until the point this afternoon when he'd told her he didn't love her after all.

Because... because he was just being a really good friend, not wanting to let her marry someone he knew was a criminal? Because he couldn't bear to see her trapped in an ultimately unhappy marriage? Jimmy had said something about Clark getting increasingly desperate as the wedding date had approached.

Clark's motives seemed unfathomable now. If he really did love her, then why tell her this afternoon that he didn't? If he just wanted to be friends, why get so upset, and angry, and jealous, over all those weeks before her wedding? Why had he barely spoken to her in weeks? It had seemed as if he'd taken her decision to marry Lex personally, somehow. She still remembered the biting scorn in his voice as he'd told her that she was an investigative reporter, so she should \*investigate!\* The tone, and his implication that she was incapable of being objective, of seeing the truth about the man she was engaged to, had hurt.

But it had been the truth... she had been incapable, or unwilling, to see the reality behind Lex's facade of courtly charm, the philanthropic businessman. And when the truth had started to emerge just after she'd called a halt to the wedding it had been a horrible shock. She had only just been getting used to the idea that her ex-fiance was no less than a criminal, though, when he had taken his plunge from the balcony of his penthouse suite. She had seen him hurtle towards the ground and had swiftly turned her head into Clark's shoulder, unwilling to see his battered and broken body lying on the ground. But although she had been led away without seeing the dead body of her ex-fiance, images of his bloody corpse had haunted her dreams since.

Perhaps things would be better now that the Planet was to reopen, Lois thought. Once she had the demands of her job to occupy her mind, and her waking hours, again she would be able to put all of these

memories and horrors out of her mind. And then she would be able to sleep again.

Her answering machine was blinking. Surprised, she pushed thoughts of the past out of her mind and pressed the button to play her messages, wondering as she did so who knew she'd moved back to her old apartment. She froze as the first message played back to her:

"Hey, Lois baby! This is Johnny at the Star - we can offer you fifty grand for the exclusive! You won't get a better offer. Give me a call!"

Choking back a gasp, she reached for the control and hit the delete button. But there were more messages, and they were all the same. Every news organisation in Metropolis, and a number beyond, was after her. They all wanted the story of her life with the fallen hero, the philanthropist turned villain.

And the subtext for each and every one of them would be how Lois Lane, award-winning investigative reporter, by reputation the best journalist in Metropolis, had been taken in so easily.

And, for Lois, that was the hardest thing of all to deal with. How could she have been so gullible? Why hadn't she \*believed\* those who'd tried to warn her? Why had she allowed herself to be fooled by Luthor's charm - she, who didn't trust any man, who had always believed that everyone had an angle? As Clark had once accused her, she'd believed that there were no honest people left in the world. Yet she'd put all that scepticism aside when it had come to Luthor.

Why had she done it? The hard, cold fact was that she didn't know. She hadn't even been in love with him. But the man she had loved hadn't wanted her... and Lex had. So she had ignored all other possibilities and settled for the security he'd offered her.

And now... he'd been exposed as a murderous villain, he was dead, and her life and reputation were in tatters.

Angrily brushing away the hot tears which were now flowing down her cheeks, she deleted the remaining messages on her machine and went to bed.

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Clark was out early the next morning; he'd been awakened by the sound of sirens a mile or so away and had immediately gone out to see what the problem was. He hadn't really needed to go, he'd been aware, but once awake he hadn't really wanted to lie awake brooding on events. He would far rather be occupied in something else.

It was strange, he mused as he flew over the city on a patrol, that he should still feel disturbed and upset. After all, it was over. Luthor was dead. Lois was no longer on the point of marrying someone else. And the Planet was reopening. All should be well again.

But, he reflected with a sigh, life was rarely that simple. Lois wouldn't simply turn up at work whenever the Planet was open for business and be the same as she'd always been. She had a lot of anger, hurt and betrayal to work through - probably grief as well,

his mother had pointed out to him the previous evening. Clark had been sceptical about that one: why should Lois grieve for a monster?

"Clark, honey, she's grieving for the man she thought she was marrying, the man she probably thought she loved," Martha had remonstrated gently. "She didn't know anything about what he was really like. She found out just before she was about to say 'I do,' for heaven's sake! And then, before she'd even had time to let that sink in, he'd committed suicide right in front of her - she saw the man she'd intended to marry fall to his death! Of \*course\* she's going to be grieving, honey!"

With a grimace, Clark now reminded himself that his mother was no doubt correct. He would have to tread very carefully around Lois; he wanted to be there for her, but could he bring himself to sympathise with her feelings of grief, if that was how she felt?

But then he remembered her expression as Luthor had crashed to the ground in front of her: the anguish, horror, desperation and self-disgust. He remembered how he had instinctively tightened his arms around her and cradled her head in his shoulder. Yes, he would be there for her no matter how she was feeling.

His Super-hearing kicked in suddenly, interrupting his musings. Something was happening... there was an altercation of some sort. And it was - over by Lois's part of town. He concentrated... yes, it was Carter Avenue.

He put on a spurt of speed, and a few moments later was hovering in the air above the road in front of Lois's building. What he saw made him furiously angry, and he quickly swept down to land in front of the assembled throng.

"Just what is going on here? Why are you people harassing this woman?"

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Lois surveyed the contents of her refrigerator in dismay. When she'd moved back in, her mother had brought over a large bag of groceries, enough to keep her going for a few days. But she was now running out of essentials, and she would need to do some shopping.

With a grimace, she collected her coat and purse and headed out of the apartment. But a shock greeted her as she exited the apartment block: her eyes were blinded by the flash of a dozen or more flashbulbs and a cacophony of voices shouted to her at once.

"Lois - hey Lois, what was it like being Luthor's moll?"

"Lois! How did it feel to find out your fiance's a crook?"

"Hey Lane, what was Luthor like in bed?"

"Lois! Did you and Lex plan the Planet bombing together?"

Holding her hand in front of her eyes for protection, Lois muttered 'No comment' and tried to push her way past the people who, she knew, were actually her fellow professionals but for whom she at that

moment actually felt hatred. They were harassing her - \*hounding\* her. Only that morning there had been another half dozen messages on her answering machine, and she'd made the mistake of switching on one of the TV news broadcasts as she'd drunk her coffee. Lex's face had been the first picture she'd seen, and her own name had been mentioned very shortly afterwards. She hadn't waited to hear what was being said, immediately switching off the television.

Now they were on her own doorstep. A detached part of her wondered that they hadn't been there the previous evening; perhaps they simply hadn't realised she'd returned home. She should have expected that they'd find her: that was what the press did, after all. They went after the story, wherever it happened to be. And right now she was the biggest story in town apart from Luthor himself, who was conveniently dead; or inconveniently, depending which way you looked at it, she mused wryly.

The biter bit, she realised with a feeling of shame for the times when she herself would have been among the most eager of the doorsteppers. Of course, she wouldn't have been asking some of the more intrusive questions, but - being honest with herself - she had to admit that she would have wanted to know how much the 'victim' had known. And she would have asked again and again until she'd got an answer.

So she supposed she couldn't really blame these reporters for being there. She even knew a lot of them, which didn't really make her feel much better. Had the story been almost anything other than her engagement to the greatest villain in Metropolis, she might even have been able to talk and joke with them, and answer some of their questions, but tell them that the full story would be in the Daily Planet. With this story, she wasn't even sure that the Planet would get much of the truth.

But getting past her unwelcome visitors was proving even more difficult than she'd expected. They had no intention of allowing their captive victim to evade them, and they continued to hem her in, shouting questions and insinuations, flashbulbs popping continually.

Lois looked around her in desperation. Even the door of her apartment was now out of her reach: she was surrounded. Her chances of getting away seemed miniscule, and yet she wasn't even sure just what it would take to persuade these representatives of the free press to let her go. Just what did they want her to say? That she'd been Bonnie to Luthor's Clyde? That she'd counted his ill-gotten gains as they'd lain in bed together? That she'd been an innocent dupe? (Yes, painful truth that it was, she had been a dupe). That in fact she had known all along about his criminal deeds and had been working undercover for the police in a classic 'honeytrap' sting?

That might well save her pride, she reflected ruefully, but it certainly wasn't true and she could hardly see Henderson backing her up. And people like Clark and Perry also knew the truth: that, like an idiot, a stupid, gullible fool, she had been completely taken in by Luthor.

She was beginning to feel claustrophobic, hemmed in on all sides by noisy, shouting reporters. Lois tried to force herself to take deep breaths as she tried to ignore the panic which was slowly building



inside her. Were they going to keep hounding her until she passed out from lack of oxygen and sheer desperation?

Suddenly a loud, commanding voice spoke from somewhere just above them.

"Just what is going on here? Why are you harassing this woman?"

Lois stared upwards. It was Superman; he was hovering several feet above their heads and glaring down at the assembled paparazzi.

Suddenly the throng around her moved back; it was almost as if someone had simply pushed them aside like useless junk. Superman floated down to stand on the ground in front of Lois, arms crossed in front of his chest. Ignoring the journalists, who were now watching with interest, he enquired formally, "Ms Lane, are these - \*gentlemen\* - troubling you?"

Taken by surprise, and filled with awe as always at the sight of Superman's simple defiance of gravity, she stared at him for a moment before answering. "I... uh, I just wanted to get some groceries...." She trailed off, her eyes flicking to their silent audience. A number of flashbulbs went off, and Superman swung around to glare at the offenders.

"Any more of that harassment and I'll confiscate your cameras," he said crisply. Turning back to Lois, he spoke more quietly. "Can I give you a ride to the supermarket?"

But Lois was beginning to recover her senses, and was remembering the last time she'd spoken to the Super-hero. Fragments of that conversation rushed into her mind....

< Unless it's lined with lead, I wouldn't bother....>

< I'd like to believe that, Lois, but in the circumstances I don't see how I can....>

Closing her eyes briefly as if to shut out the coldness of his words, Lois saw herself again standing in her living-room, looking away from Superman as she pleaded with him, only to realise he had already left as she turned back to face him. She had thought that this man was her friend, and more - that he had feelings for her. Oh, he'd told her that night that he \*did\* have feelings for her, but they clearly hadn't been strong enough to prevent him saying things designed to hurt her. They clearly weren't enough for him to want her.

She raised her gaze to him now, her eyes stormy. "Thanks for the offer, Superman, and for your help here. But I can manage now."

Abruptly, she turned and walked along the path towards her Jeep, past the reporters who watched her in puzzlement as they wondered why Lois Lane, supposedly Superman's closest friend, should be so cold to the Man of Steel. Especially as he'd just stepped in to defend her. But Superman spoke again, interrupting their newly raised voices.

"If any one of you even attempts to speak to Ms Lane today, you'll

have me to answer to," he declared in a commanding tone. "And my Super-hearing and Super-vision have a very long range." Fixing the assembled throng with a steely glare, he began to drift upwards again and was out of sight within a few minutes, by which time Lois had driven off.

She was still shaking as she drew the Jeep to a halt outside the local supermarket; seeing Superman so unexpectedly had unnerved her. She was angry with him for the things he had said to her - but she was also cringing with embarrassment remembering her declaration of love for him. < I am so completely in love with you > she had told him, only for him to make it clear that he didn't feel the same way. Not only that, but he had clearly been embarrassed by her open admission of her feelings.

How did she feel about Superman now? Lois wasn't sure. He wasn't at the top of her popularity list, that was for sure. But on the other hand, no matter how hurt she was by what he'd said to her, she had still felt that familiar frisson when he'd drifted down to stand in front of her. Her heart had leapt and her stomach had quivered in the same old way. Yes, she was still attracted to him.

She... still loved him? But how could that be the case when she'd realised on her wedding day that she had very strong feelings for Clark? Was it possible to love two men at once?

Not that any of that shed any light on her behaviour in respect of Lex Luthor. She grimaced as she picked up a basket and started to make her way quickly along the aisles. She had believed herself in love with Superman - and had been harbouring latent feelings for her partner - but had agreed to marry the one man in her life for whom she only felt liking. What on earth had she been thinking? Why had she allowed Lex to persuade her to accept his proposal, when only a few short months earlier she'd thought he was behaving like some crazy obsessive after he'd shown her an exact replica of her apartment in his nuclear bunker and asked her to escape from the asteroid with him?

She had been a little crazy, that was all. Correction - a \*lot\* crazy. And even though she hadn't married him in the end and Lex was dead, it wasn't over yet.

She was now the biggest story in town, and that would take some living down.

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Clark watched Lois as she drove to the supermarket, hovering above the clouds where he wouldn't be seen. She hadn't been hassled as she left her car, so it looked as if the reporters had heeded his warnings. But he was puzzled. Why had she been so distant with him? She never normally behaved towards Superman in that way. And the way she had looked at him... once she had recovered from her initial relief, she had seemed angry.

He couldn't think of any reason why Lois would be less than favourably disposed towards Superman... or could he? Suddenly, an image of his last encounter with Lois as the Man of Steel flashed into his mind. He had come to her apartment at her request, angry himself because of her rejection of Clark and her immediate hint that

Superman was the only person who could dissuade her from marrying Lex. When he'd arrived she'd been wearing a sheer nightgown, and she'd instantly murmured something about putting on a robe. He had allowed his annoyance with her to colour his response, telling her not to bother unless it was lined with lead. Her shock and hurt had been evident from the expression in her soft doe-eyes, and he'd instantly wanted to recall his words. Too late.

Then, of course, had come her declaration of love. But following so soon after her complete rejection of Clark, he had been unable to humour her. He had known exactly what she was up to, and he had decided to call her bluff. For some reason, he thought, she wanted him to plead with her not to marry Lex; perhaps she had even been using the threat of accepting the tycoon's proposal as a lever to persuade Superman to return her feelings for him. But he had refused to play along. He hadn't been able to lie, so he had admitted that he had feelings for her, while insisting that nothing could come of them. But she had then added insult to injury by telling him that she would love him if he was just an ordinary man, with no powers at all. That had been too much; after all, she had rejected that same ordinary man only hours earlier. At that point, he had simply told her that, under the circumstances, he couldn't possibly believe her. He had then flown off.

And today was the first time she had seen Superman at close quarters since that evening, Clark realised now. He supposed that in those circumstances she might well feel uncomfortable around him; after all, she had laid her feelings for him bare, and he had rejected her, and been hurtful in the process. Superman would therefore not exactly be her favourite person.

Well, he couldn't help that. And Superman wasn't about to go and pay Lois a house call to apologise; although given the opportunity to do it over again Clark might have handled that encounter a little differently, he didn't regret telling Lois there could be no future for her with Superman.

Now with \*Clark\* - that was an entirely different matter. But first, Lois needed to recover from the past few weeks. Then he might try again, though he would be a little more subtle this time. No more rushing his fences, declaring his love for her before he was sure how she felt about him. Even if it meant playing it a little cool and letting her be the first to indicate how she felt about him....

< Stop it, Clark!> he told himself with a grimace. He was thinking almost as if the prospect of himself and Lois as a couple was a foregone conclusion. But she simply didn't see Clark in that light. He discounted the way she'd looked at him outside the Planet the previous day; she was emotionally overwrought and was looking for the security of a close friend whom, she knew, would not let her down.

She certainly wasn't looking for a lover - and if she was at any time in the future, it wouldn't be Clark Kent. He would simply have to get used to that fact.

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Almost a week later, Lois exited the stairwell in the Planet's temporary offices and glanced around her curiously. Perry, with

Franklin Stern's approval, had rented a floor in an office block and the journalists and admin staff were working in rather cramped quarters there. The print facility had been harder to relocate, and Perry had bought up some spare capacity at a rival's plant. Now that the Planet's insurance policies had been located and had paid out, the laid-off print workers were receiving basic pay until such time as the old building had been rebuilt.

Lois had taken Perry up on his offer of a few days off before restarting work: part of her had simply wanted to jump back in as soon as possible as means of distracting her thoughts, but another part of her had insisted that she needed to put some time and distance between the events of her wedding day before facing her colleagues at work. Friends they might be, but they were also reporters and they too would be curious, would want the story.

She hadn't yet decided what she was going to do about that aspect of things. Yes, she was a hot property right now, and she was still receiving offers for her exclusive version of events. She had no intention, of course, of speaking to any news organisation other than the Planet, but she had yet to decide just how much she would give the Planet. It would seem to be a simple task for a reporter of her skill and experience to sit down and write a dispassionate account of her month or so as the almost-bride of Luthor, but every time she thought about doing it, she found herself on the verge of panic. Lois wasn't sure why it should affect her in such a way: she was a consummate professional, after all, so she should have no difficulty in doing a professional job. She should be able to put her personal feelings to one side and simply write the story, as she had done so many times in the past.

But, in the past, the story had never been \*about\* her.

So she had used Perry's offer of a few days off in order to try to get her shattered senses in some order. She simply couldn't do her job if she was going to get into a panic every time Lex Luthor's name was mentioned in her hearing. She had to put all that nonsense behind her and get on with her life. And part of getting on with her life would be writing up the Luthor story. No-one else could do that; she was in a position to write one of the best stories of her life. And apart from the story of her own relationship with Metropolis's answer to Al Capone, there was all the rest of Lex's criminal doings.

A lot of the initial research had already been written up, and Lois had forced herself to read the Planet's and other newspapers' accounts of Luthor's activities. But, in the times when she was able to read the stories objectively, her trained reporter's mind raised all the questions which remained unanswered in these articles. And in those moments she itched to be getting on with the job of finding answers to those questions.

So here she was, back at work and ready to jump straight into it. First, though, she had to find her desk. That wasn't going to be easy, she realised wryly as she noticed the very cramped layout of the room. Every desk seemed to be occupied, some by more than one person.

She jumped suddenly as she felt a hand on her arm. "Lois?" a voice spoke softly, questioningly, from beside her.

She swung around and faced Clark. She hadn't seen him since that day outside the Planet, a week ago, though that had been entirely her choice. He had called her the following day, in the afternoon, suggesting that they get together for pizzas and a movie that evening. But Lois's emotions had still been in a jumble after their strange conversation the previous day, and she hadn't felt ready to see him. She had put him off, and had behaved equally evasively the next few times he'd called. So he'd stopped suggesting that they meet, and when he had called - which had been almost every day - he had simply enquired after her well-being and accepted without argument her insistence that she was fine and just wanted to be left alone.

He was smiling down at her now, seeming pleased to see her. "Lois - it's good to see you back," he told her warmly. "How are you doing?"

"Um... fine, Clark," she insisted. "But I'll be a lot better once I know where the heck I'm going to work. This place is impossible - I don't know how anyone's going to manage to get any work done here! Why Perry couldn't have got someplace bigger, or wired everyone up to work from home, I can't understand. It isn't as if he doesn't have the insurance money now...." She trailed off, realising that she was running out of words.

"It's okay, Lois," Clark replied, though to what he was referring she really didn't know. "Look, your desk is over here, though one of the new staff members has been using it temporarily. He'll move now that you're back."

Lois eyed the small desk, wedged into a corner between several others, suspiciously. There was no space for her plants, and once her computer and keyboard had been arranged to her satisfaction there would be very little room to actually do any \*work.\* Perhaps she would simply work at home anyway....

She vaguely heard Clark offer to get her a coffee, and nodded distractedly as she waited for the new staff member to collect his things and leave, not bothering to introduce herself to him. If he'd been working at the Planet for the past few days, he would know who Lois Lane was, and would no doubt also know that discretion was the better part of valour where she was concerned.

She spent the first hour or so bringing herself up to speed on the Luthor investigation, re-reading the Planet's already-published articles and getting Jimmy to bring her the files which someone had managed to put together in a very short space of time on the man's criminal activities. She realised with a shock that a large part of the collection of information had been amassed by Clark, which reminded her that Lex's downfall was to a large extent Clark's doing. He had been right all along, she remembered again; and she had accused him of reacting purely from jealousy.

As she read through the files and realised the activities and events which, in retrospect, were now being attributed directly or indirectly to Luthor, Lois grew more and more appalled at her own role in the saga. There were so many incidents where, at the time they occurred, she could remember exactly what she had been doing, usually with Luthor. At the opera, or drinking champagne, or flying to Paris for dinner... trivial, shallow activities with a man who had

seemed, at the time, to be the epitome of urbane, intelligent charm. But he hadn't been what he'd seemed... and she, the self-proclaimed best reporter in Metropolis, had failed to see through him.

< I can't do this....> Getting up abruptly, she hurried towards Perry's office which was situated at the far corner of the room. The editor was in, thankfully, and she knocked briskly.

Perry stood up as she entered, the broad smile on his face indicating how pleased he was to see her. "Lois, honey! It's so good to see you, and welcome back to the Planet!" He walked towards her, arms open to embrace her.

Lois allowed herself to be held within Perry's embrace for a few moments, but then withdrew and stood facing him. "Perry - I can't do this. I thought I could, but I can't."

The editor's expression altered as a frown descended. "What do you mean, honey? What can't you do?"

Lois waved her arms around her, as if that answered the question. "This. Write the story. I should be able to, I know I should, but... I just can't, Chief. Every time I read more about what Luthor was really like, I just...." She trailed off, tears beginning to prick at her eyes. "I can't do my job any more, Perry! I don't know...."

"Now, honey, don't upset yourself," Perry soothed, his tone not entirely hiding his own anxiety. "It is very soon, you know. You don't have to come back to work just yet - in fact, maybe you should take a vacation. Get completely away from here. You know it'll do you good, and your job will still be here when you get back."

"No," Lois whispered. "I'm not sure... I might never be able to do it again...."

Perry shook his head firmly. "Lois, sweetheart, you were a brilliant journalist before all this happened, and you will be again. Take a vacation, then come back and dive straight in. Write a story - any story - and it'll just be like riding a bike. You'll see. You'll do that for me, honey?"

Lois shrugged. "I don't know, Perry. Maybe. But... you know, it's the way people look at me, too. Like I've got two heads or something - it's everywhere I go. I can't even go to the shops without being stared at. And I know why they're doing it, too. But I don't want to be an object of pity. I've \*got\* to get my life back, but I don't even know where to start."

Perry shook his head slowly, realising that this entire business had affected Lois in a far deeper way than he'd even imagined. He desperately wanted to help her, but he hadn't the first notion of where to start. Lois Lane had been like a daughter to him since the day she'd started her internship at the Planet six years earlier, as a final-year journalism student at MetU. He'd seen her through crises in her life before this, but none of those prior events had left him worrying that she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. This time... he knew she was very close to the edge, and he wasn't sure how to handle it.

"Lois - have you seen your doctor lately?" he ventured at last, holding his breath as he hoped she wouldn't lash out at him for the invasiveness of his question.

"My doctor?" Her tone was cool, defensive.

"Yes. You know, I just thought it might help, if you could talk to someone who's qualified to give advice - "

"You mean like a shrink?" Lois demanded angrily. "Just where do you get off telling me I need to see a shrink? You're my boss, Chief, not my keeper."

"Okay, okay," he replied, palms held outwards in a conciliatory gesture. "Look, forget I said that. But please, honey, think about taking a vacation. You've been through a pretty rough experience, and you need time to recover from it."

Lois shrugged again, her anger forgotten. "I'll think about it, okay?" With that, she swung on her heel and headed for the door, intending to pack up her things and head home for the day. She would try to do some work in her apartment, but she couldn't stay in the newsroom any longer.

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Clark sat at his desk running the stub of his pencil thoughtfully along his upper lip. He had seen Lois suddenly jump up from her desk and head for Perry's office, and although his innate sense of good manners had insisted that he should respect her privacy, he had in the end listened in on her conversation. What he had heard had shocked him greatly. He'd realised that Lois was bound to be hurting, but he had allowed himself to believe her assertions on the phone that she was okay. Clearly she had been lying. And more seriously, she was in a far worse emotional state than he could have envisaged.

It was tempting to go to her and offer his friendship and support, to insist on driving her home and being there if she wanted to talk. But she'd resisted his overtures in that direction so far: why would she change now? It occurred to him after a moment's reflection that sympathy wasn't what she would respond to at the moment. He knew Lois Lane well enough to understand that she would reject any such overtures, seeing them as pity. No, he needed to try a different tack....

Clark strolled purposefully towards Lois's desk and perched on the edge, watching her stuff her belongings into her bag. "Going somewhere, Lois? It's a little early to be knocking off," he observed casually but with a faintly sarcastic edge to his voice.

She turned to glance at him, clearly surprised by his tone. "I'm going home," she told him abruptly.

"Home?" He favoured her with a sceptical glance. "Excuse me, but are you sure you're really Lois Lane? Because, you know, the Lois I've known for the past year would never just pack up and go home in the middle of the day like this, especially not after she came in late in the first place."

Lois glared at him, clearly regarding him as an irritating nuisance. "Look, Clark, it's really none of your business what I do."

He raised his eyebrows sharply in mock-amazement. "It isn't? Last I heard, we were partners."

She shrugged, deliberately turning away from him. "Well, things change, don't they?" Then, seeming to think better of her dismissive manner, she turned back to face him. "Look, Clark, you'd really be better off looking for another partner. I'm going to take a vacation, and I really don't know what I'll do when I get back. I might even decide to take a career break, so...." She trailed off, deliberately leaving Clark to draw his own conclusions from her comment.

"A career break?" he repeated incredulously. Shaking his head, he continued, "No, you can't be Lois Lane. The Lois I know would barely agree to take a vacation, let alone a career break. You've got to be a fake. Unless...." he added, deliberately trailing off in an uncertain tone.

That got her attention. "Unless what?"

Clark smiled cruelly as he moved in for the kill. "Unless you've lost your nerve."

She gasped, staring at him in appalled shock. Her hand went to her throat as she tried to speak but seemed unable to find the words.

"That's it, Lois, isn't it?" Clark continued to taunt her. "You've lost your nerve! You're letting all this Lex stuff get to you so much you don't think you can be objective any more, and you think you've lost your edge. You're running away." He smiled again, as if in triumph at being right.

She continued to stare at him, her brown eyes wide with shock and reminding Clark of a tiny creature caught in the dazzle of a car's headlamps. His heart clenched and, for about the dozenth time since he'd started this, he ached to take her in his arms and assure her that he hadn't meant the cruel words, the taunting expression. But he knew she would hate that even more. His sympathy was the last thing she needed right now.

"So you're letting Luthor win after all, isn't that right, Lois?" he asked her sardonically. "He never wanted the woman you were before you got engaged to him. He never wanted your intelligence, your talent or your thirst for knowledge. He only ever wanted to subdue and control you - and it looks like he's managed that even though he's dead."

He saw the effect his words had on her: the further sharply-drawn intakes of breath, the tiny muscle twitching in her throat, the increased heartbeat and the flush on her cheeks. He had hurt her. But, he reminded herself, at least she was *\*feeling\**! This was better, this had to be better, than shutting herself away in a deep-freeze where not a hint of real, warm emotion could get near her. Yes, he was hurting her; but he was being cruel to be kind, and it was the only way of getting through to her right now.

He was rewarded for his efforts when Lois tilted her chin in the



familiar challenging gesture. "You think that's what I'm doing, Kent, running away?" She glared at him, her eyes flashing angrily in a return of the old Lois. "You think so? You'd like that, of course - takes the competition out of your way!"

"What competition, Lois?" Clark enquired in a superior drawl. "Right now, you're not even competition for Jimmy."

She gasped again, but this time the exclamation was immediately followed by a gritting of her teeth. "That's what you think, is it? Well, you just wait, Kent. I'll show you I'm still the best there is. You just wait!"

She pushed at his shoulder, trying to get him to move out of her way, and sat down at her desk again, pulling her keyboard towards her. Clark watched her for a moment, then walked away, a satisfied smile on his face and relief in his heart.

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How *dared* Kent accuse her of losing her nerve, of running away! Lois was fuming as she began to type furiously. He had one hell of a nerve himself - and he'd claimed to be her friend? Some friend he was! He'd been cruel, hurtful, and very spiteful. Well, he could forget their partnership - and from now on she would do everything she could to make sure she outgunned him on every piece of work she did for the Planet.

A couple of hours later, she had finished what she considered a very credible first draft of her story. "My life with Lex Luthor," a Planet exclusive by Lois Lane, was ready to be sent to Perry for approval. She sat back in her chair with a sigh of relief and satisfaction. It was a good article, even though writing it had cost her considerable pain. It hurt to have to recognise how stupid, how blindly trusting she'd been. And everyone who read that article would also see how the great Lois Lane had been fooled.

But in some ways writing the article had been cathartic. She knew she'd been foolish to think she couldn't write any more. And even better, doing the piece had reminded her how much she actually *enjoyed* journalism. She'd always experienced a real thrill when she finished writing a genuinely good article, and this was no exception despite its subject-matter. She didn't need that holiday, after all, and once Perry had edited her story she would tell him so.

She also had to tell him something else, she remembered, glancing across towards where Clark sat, his attention focused on his computer screen. She couldn't carry on working with Kent now she knew what he really thought about her... could she?

She stilled suddenly, remembering his words and the effect they'd had on her. They had hurt, inflicting stinging wounds on her. He had been so cruel it had almost been as if he had *wanted* to hurt her. But Clark was... he had always been one of the nicest, most caring men she knew. She had never known him deliberately set out to hurt anyone. But in some ways his taunts had reminded her of their early relationship, when they had frequently sparred with each other, exchanging taunts which, on the surface, could have been hurtful but were rarely intended to be so. Each had known that the other hadn't intended deliberate insult, instead fencing with each other as if

they were using shielded foils.

But this time she hadn't been fencing with him. Instead, he had come to her and had attacked her with words clearly designed to get under her skin and hurt. But why would he...?

In a sudden revelation, she knew the answer. Clark had somehow realised how close to the edge she was, how near she was to giving up her career entirely because she'd lost faith in herself. And he'd decided to shock her out of her depression by lashing out at her, forcing her to defend herself in the style of which she was a master - by lashing out at him in return. And so he had managed to get beneath her closely-guarded protective shell to find the 'real' Lois Lane beneath. The Lois Lane who, as Clark had hinted beneath his taunts, wouldn't give up so easily, wouldn't allow something like her crazy engagement to Lex Luthor defeat her.

And he'd been right: his tactics had worked. She had lashed out at him in return, and had immediately set herself to prove him wrong. But she couldn't bring herself to be angry with Clark. He had done her a favour, there was no doubt about that. Without his intervention, she would have been on her way to the airport by now, trying to get as far away from Metropolis as she could. She would certainly never have written what she was sure was a really great article. Yes, she owed Clark.

Not that she would ever tell him that. No; but she would remember. She allowed herself another glance across at her erstwhile partner; he was now busy typing and not paying her any attention whatsoever. Lois smiled to herself; Clark Kent was okay after all, even if he didn't seem to know his own mind as far as his feelings for her were concerned. Perhaps she would allow him to continue to be her partner after all.

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"So how is Lois doing now, Clark?" Jonathan Kent enquired as he and his adopted son took a breather from their task of repairing one of the boundary fences. This was a job which Clark, of course, could have completed in minutes at Super-speed, but he had chosen not to do so. The more obvious reason for this choice - and the one he'd given his father - was the possibility of being seen by passers-by. But Clark's real reason was that he gained a lot of pleasure out of working side-by-side with his father, performing tasks at human speed, albeit with a little application of Super-powers here and there.

Clark ran his hand roughly through the lock of hair which was threatening to fall forward into his eyes, brushing it back, before replying. "I'm not really sure, Dad. Well, I am, I guess - she's not good. I mean, she's doing her job, and doing it \*great,\* but it's all mechanical. It's like there's no emotion there any more."

Jonathan regarded the piece of fence in his hand for several seconds before replying. "Well, son, she's been through a pretty rough time. It's not surprising she'd want to keep herself to herself for a while, maybe just take some time to get over it."

"Yeah, and I could understand it if I believed that's all there is to it, but I'm not sure it is," Clark replied broodingly. "It isn't just

that she needs time - I think she's closing in on herself. You know how she was when I first met her?"

Jonathan smiled as he remembered his son's outburst of almost a year before. "You mean stubborn, pigheaded, and brilliant?"

Clark grinned wryly despite himself. "Sure. She's still that, and I wouldn't want her to be any other way. That's Lois - she wouldn't \*be\* Lois without that. No, I meant that when I first knew her she was, oh, just so \*driven.\* Nothing mattered to her except getting the story. She didn't seem to have a personal life, and other people were there - well, really just for her convenience. Well, that's how she played it, at any rate," he added. "I did find out soon enough that was just a front. But it was what was underneath that front which really worried me."

His father nodded; this was a familiar topic. "She'd been let down, hurt so many times in her life that she was afraid to trust."

"Exactly!" Clark agreed. "But, Dad, I managed to get underneath that protective shell of hers. Oh, not in the way I wanted to, but I was her \*friend\*! And she even acknowledged that - she told me I was her best friend. But now... all the walls have gone back up again."

"You broke through them before, son, you can do it again," Jonathan advised his son reassuringly. "And it won't take as long this time because you've both been there before."

Clark grimaced, pulling a piece of the old fence out of the ground and crushing it with one hand. "I'm not so sure, Dad. It isn't just that she's been betrayed yet again by a man she trusted - maybe two men, after all Superman wasn't very kind to her either. This time... she's brittle, Dad. She won't let anyone get near her, talk to her, but I'm afraid she's just going to snap one of these days and I won't be around to help her. She won't accept my help."

"Just keep trying, son."

Clark sighed. "I am. Just about every day since she came back to work I've offered to buy her lunch, asked if she wants to grab a pizza and watch a movie... but she isn't interested. She's polite, but that's about it."

"What about her family? Aren't they spending time with her?" Jonathan enquired.

Clark started to drive in the new fence-posts with his fists. "She doesn't want to talk to them either. I've spoken to her father a couple of times - he told me she went back home after one night at her mother's apartment, and since then every time he or her mother have spoken to her she's insisted she's fine." He sighed again. "And the other thing which worries me is the fact that we're all still working on Luthor stories. More stuff comes up about him all the time - evidence of his involvement in all sorts of things no-one even suspected. And I know that has to affect Lois. I mean, half the newsroom, between the City section, the financial section and the gossip staff, is working on Luthor investigations one way or another. \*She\* isn't - Perry insisted she stay off it, she's too close to it

to be objective, quite apart from the effect it might have on her. But she's working next to people who're writing about her ex-fiance, and who are getting unpleasant information about him all day long. She's bound to hear us talking about it, and some of what gets said must be hurtful."

"Clark, all you can do is be there for her, son," Jonathan advised. "She knows you care about her. One of these days she'll be ready to open up."

"I hope so, Dad," Clark murmured. "I hope so."

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A week later, the rebuilding at the Planet's old offices had been completed and the staff moved back in. For a while Clark wondered how Perry expected anyone to do any work towards getting the paper out, since everyone was trying to get the hang of the new computer system. Everything had been upgraded; paper communication was banned; and those who had refused to use the old electronic mail system before were swiftly having to learn to deal with email. It didn't bother Clark personally; he had used email and the Internet long before these simpler Windows-based systems had been developed, and he was quite happy to switch to electronic methods of working.

Lois wasn't especially happy about it, which didn't surprise Clark since he'd lost count of the number of times in the past year he'd had to help her find a file she'd somehow managed to lose on her hard disk, or rescue her from some fatal exception error she had managed to create. She wasn't a great fan of technology except in the strictly utilitarian sense. If it helped her to do her job more easily, then it was okay. If it involved effort and didn't work correctly the first time she tried it, she didn't want anything to do with it.

But Clark was quite happy to spend an hour or so at Lois's side helping her to configure her desktop in the way which suited her best, showing her how the new email software worked and how it integrated with the fax software and the Internet browser for external searches, as well as the Planet's own electronic information databases. He even took her Rolodex and copied several of the addresses from that into the email software, so that the snail-mail addresses and phone numbers of her contacts would be easier to find. Not that she was altogether grateful; she grumbled yet again about the pointlessness of the new system as Clark returned from the coffee-machine with more refills for the two of them.

"I just don't see the point of investing my time getting used to all this, Clark. We all know that next year some overpaid consultant is going to stroll in here and tell Perry that this stuff is all out of date, and then we'll just have to learn something completely different!"

Clark smiled, amused; this was more like the Lois he was used to. "That's not going to happen, Lois. This stuff is right up at the cutting-edge of communications technology. We shouldn't need to upgrade again for at least three years."

"So that's the life expectancy of office equipment these days, is it?" Lois bit back. "You know, you should ask Perry just how long he

used that battered old typewriter of his. This country has really become a throwaway society these days, and it's just disgraceful - "

"Hey, Lois, save the crusading for the editorial pages!" Clark teased her. "Look, it's all done now, your files are all here in these directories I created, and your mail software should be easy to use. Okay?"

She gave him a wry smile. "I guess so. Thanks, Clark."

He smiled back, enjoying what these days was a rare moment of companionship. "You're welcome - any time. Hey, Lois, it's nearly one o'clock - how about we go grab a sandwich at the deli across the way?"

She hesitated, and Clark found himself pleading to some unknown entity < Please, don't let her say no...> Then she raised her gaze to his again and gave him a wobbly smile. "Sure. I'd like that."

He got to his feet again, offering her his arm. "Come on, partner."

They shared a booth in the deli, a place they had frequently gone for lunch together in the past, in the pre-Luthor days. Clark deliberately kept the conversation light at first, focusing on a story they were working on which had nothing to do with the Planet's Luthor investigations. Clark had, over the past week or so, quietly dropped most of his work on the Luthor stories, mainly out of concern for Lois. She was still his partner, and he didn't want to be in a position of having to hide what he was working on when she came to talk to him. Nor did he want to have to lie or evade if she asked him about any work he was doing which didn't involve her.

After a while Lois began to relax and even started smiling at his weak jokes, and for a few minutes Clark could see the old Lois begin to emerge from the brittle woman who had taken her place over the past few weeks. He began to feel hopeful that he was at last making the breakthrough to the real, warm Lois he remembered; that she was actually allowing him through her protective shell at last.

They emerged from the restaurant to warm sunshine, and Clark smiled down at Lois warmly before speaking again. "Shame we have to go back to work - this'd be a great afternoon for playing hookey and going for a walk in the park or something."

In a gesture very typical of his best friend from a couple of months earlier, Lois tucked her hand in his arm. "Sounds tempting. You know, I haven't done anything like that for ages - when I worked at LNN I never had anyone to play hookey with." She paused, then continued with a catch in her voice, "I guess it's hard to make friends at work when you're engaged to the boss."

< Especially when the boss is Lex Luthor> Clark thought grimly, but didn't allow his feelings to show. Instead, he gave her a teasing smile. "Well, you're back at the Planet now, and I'm afraid you're stuck with me as a partner. And you know, I'm pretty good company on this playing hookey stuff."

She studied him for a moment. "Yeah, you are. Clark, I...." She

stopped abruptly, then added in a different tone, "Come on, we need to get back."

Wondering what had caused her sudden change of mood, Clark nodded and set a faster pace towards the Planet building.

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< I almost told him I'd missed him!> Lois realised in shock as she travelled up in the elevator with Clark. But what would have been wrong with that? her little inner voice enquired. Clark was her friend - her best friend. And her partner, and he'd been very good to her since she'd come back to work.

But things weren't as simple as that, she told herself soberly. She still hadn't a clue what to make of Clark's behaviour in telling her he loved her and then withdrawing his declaration. And then, when they'd agreed to be friends again - close friends - he'd then suddenly decided that running off somewhere was more important than staying and spending some time with her. And as her friend he had to have known that she needed his company right at that moment.

No, she couldn't allow him to get close to her again. It was much safer if she kept Clark, like everyone else, at a distance. If she didn't allow people to get close to her, then she couldn't be hurt again. It was as simple as that.

And it wasn't as if she \*needed\* people in her life in order to be happy and fulfilled. She could gain all the fulfilment she needed from her career.

Leaving the elevator and walking into the newsroom, Lois turned to Clark and thanked him for lunch very politely.

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So much for thinking he'd made a breakthrough! Clark thought bitterly that evening as he returned home from his nightly Superman patrol. As if it wasn't enough that for some reason she had gone cool on him on their way back from lunch - that polite little thank-you was a masterly exercise in telling someone to get lost - but then Perry had to call an impromptu meeting to announce that the Planet's new owner had decided that the staff needed help to overcome the trauma of the bombing. Franklin Stern had decided to employ a psychiatrist part-time, and Perry was encouraging everyone to make appointments to see her. And while he'd been speaking, the editor's glances had been very pointedly directed at Lois.

Naturally, she'd been furious. She had stormed off immediately afterwards, returning a few minutes later with a coffee and a replenished supply of chocolate bars. But of course, when Clark had gone to ask whether she was all right, she had insisted coldly that she was fine.

"Is that why you have all those candy bars in your desk drawer?" Clark hadn't been able to resist asking. She had flushed angrily before telling him to mind his own business and walking away.

Perry should have realised that suggesting that Lois see a psychiatrist was not a good idea, Clark thought grimly. No matter

what her mental state, even if it was obvious to anyone with eyes in their head that she'd come close to cracking up, she would never see a shrink. She hadn't much respect for the medical profession as a whole, he knew, though that was partly by virtue of being a doctor's daughter who had a very poor relationship with her father. All medics suffered from guilt by association in Lois's mind.

He diverted suddenly and flew towards her apartment, hovering overhead and scanning the building. She was there, dressed in jeans and a loose sweatshirt, doing her laundry. He hesitated; he could just fly down and knock at her window. She wouldn't refuse to let Superman in, surely, and he could try to mend fences with her as the Super-hero. He still felt twinges of guilt for the way he'd spoken to her the night she accepted Luthor's proposal. He had been needlessly cruel: no matter how much he was hurting, he had no right to lash out as Superman. Clark had been entitled to be angry; Superman had not, and it was a blot on Superman's reputation that he had treated Lois like that. All he'd needed to do was to tell Lois that it was impossible for Superman to have that kind of relationship with her.

So he could call on her, offer an olive branch... not apologise precisely, but certainly admit that he hadn't meant to be cruel. But if he did that, he would then need some sort of explanation as to \*why\* Superman had spoken in that way, and what could he say? For what reason would Superman have been hurt or angry?

Because she'd suggested that it was a choice between him or Lex Luthor? That was certainly paying Superman no compliments, Clark thought grimly. But how would Superman have known that when he'd arrived? < Clark told me....> Not again, he told himself. He used that excuse too frequently already. And - if he was honest, he really didn't want to rake up Luthor again tonight. Yes, Lois needed to talk about her engagement, and her feelings when it had all fallen apart; but he didn't want to be with her as Superman when she was ready to open up. He wanted to be there as Clark, because Clark could offer the kind of comfort Superman could not afford to.

With a long indrawn breath, Clark shot vertically up into the air before he could change his mind, and then set his course for the Atlantic. Time for a long flight, and with any luck a job for Superman.

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Over the next couple of days Lois did her best to maintain a low profile around the newsroom. She was aware that a number of people still tended to give her curious or pitying glances, especially when the morning's headlines had again focused on Lex Luthor - as they frequently did. It seemed Luthor had been involved in far more than anyone could ever have imagined - except perhaps his former henchman, Nigel St John and the manservant, Asabi. Neither of those men had been seen since the day of Lex's death. Mrs Cox, on the other hand, once she'd realised her former employer was dead, had been extremely co-operative under police questioning. Added to that, Luthor's demise meant that many of his former associates in crime, or those who had been victims, felt themselves safe to come forward.

Therefore there was an almost never-ending flow of information, new evidence, speculation... and news stories in the media. Lois couldn't

ignore it, much as part of her wanted to; but another part of her, the ambitious award-winning journalist, was telling her that she should be right in the middle of the investigating. Perry had refused in the beginning, telling her that she was too close, and she hadn't really argued with him. Her emotions had still been too raw; not from any grief over Lex, she reasoned, but from shock and anger at herself for not having seen any of this sooner.

< Clark knew....> That thought filtered into her mind each morning when she picked up her copy of the Planet and read the latest Luthor revelations. Clark had known the man was a criminal. He had tried to convince her. She had accused him of jealousy. And he had even told her he loved her... and taken back his declaration afterwards, telling her that he would have said anything at all to keep her from marrying Luthor. But his declaration had been so convincing at the time....

She pushed that thought from her mind; she couldn't figure out why that afternoon in Centennial Park kept springing into her thoughts. It had been \*weeks\* ago. Definitely water under the bridge. And it was obvious Clark felt the same way. He was still a friend to her, though she was aware that the boundaries of their friendship were currently being limited by her. He wanted to be there for her, to get her to talk to him about her feelings. He had kept suggesting things for them to do together when they weren't working, as they had done in the old days. But she was withdrawing from him, keeping their friendship casual and much of their conversation businesslike.

At the same time, though, she was aware that Clark was quietly doing things to make life easier for her. He thought she hadn't noticed that he had pulled himself off most of the Luthor investigations so that she didn't have to see her partner working for some of his time on a story she would rather not know about. She was sure he didn't know that she was aware of his habit of folding the office copies of the Planet so that any front-page stories concerning Luthor weren't showing. And she knew from something Jimmy had let slip that Clark had argued stubbornly in an editorial conference on the Luthor stories that Lois's name should be kept out of their articles as much as possible - he'd said that just because she'd been engaged to the man didn't mean that there should be gratuitous mentions of her all over the place. There were enough of those in the tabloids.

So he was being a good friend to her, as discreetly as he could given the way she was treating him. So why was she not able to open herself up to him, to try to rebuild the relationship they had enjoyed before she'd accepted Luthor's proposal?

She sighed. In some ways she didn't really know, except that it was all bound up with Clark's peculiar behaviour in withdrawing his declaration of love when he \*had\* to have been able to see what she was about to say to him, and his immediately dashing off afterwards. She had needed him... and he had deserted her. So that was a sign that she had to be self-sufficient. She couldn't allow herself to rely on someone else again, especially not a man. When it came to men, her judgement was definitely questionable.

Besides, what was there to open up about? her stubborn side objected. She was \*fine.\* There was nothing wrong with her except that people kept treating her as if she was going to fall apart any second. And she was \*not\* going to do that.



Sighing, she gathered her papers together for the morning editorial conference. As she entered the conference room, she noticed that Clark was already there and was saving a seat for her. He had also brought her a cup of coffee - not the usual over-stewed grounds from the Planet's own machine, but real mocha from the new coffee-bar in the foyer. There was also a chocolate doughnut... she slipped into the seat beside him and threw him a faint smile of thanks. He leaned towards her, murmuring, "Your turn next time, Lois."

"All right, everybody, let's get started." Perry's voice interrupted any comeback she might have been thinking of, and for the next half-hour her attention was focused on the meeting. Towards the end, however, a new item came up which caused her head to jerk up.

"Now, Lex Luthor's will-reading is today, and I've managed to get two press-passes. Any takers?"

Lois froze. How come she hadn't heard anything about that? Lex's lawyers had been in touch with her about a couple of things since his precipitate dive off the balcony of his penthouse, but there had been no mention of a will reading. She swallowed, forcing down the bile which had risen to her throat, and attracted Perry's attention.

"Clark and I will cover it." Her voice was abrupt, brittle.

Clark turned towards her, ready to protest, but Perry got in first. "Lois - now come on, I don't think that's a good idea at all. Eduardo...?"

"No, Perry, I want to do it," Lois intervened, more forcefully this time. "I *need* to do it - it's just... it might be important. And anyway," she added, knowing this would be the clincher, "I'm more likely than anyone else to know some of the beneficiaries and the hangers-on - which gives the Planet an advantage, wouldn't you say?"

Perry hesitated, his gaze turning to Clark's. Clark was watching Lois, but she simply stared back at him in determination. Eventually, it was agreed: Lane and Kent would cover the will-reading.

"Why do you want to do this, Lois?" Clark demanded as soon as they exited the conference room. "You think you're named in the will or something?" He sounded puzzled rather than accusatory, and she turned towards him to reply.

"No, I'm pretty sure I'm not - I mean, if I was the lawyers would have asked me to be there. Anyway, do you seriously think I'd accept anything from him?" she added, giving Clark an accusatory stare.

He shrugged. "Lois, I have no idea. You were engaged to the man." Seeing the instant tension in her body, he added, "Sorry. That wasn't a dig."

She grimaced. "Yeah, I was. No, it's... I don't know, I think it'll help convince me it's all over if I go."

"So we both go," he confirmed.

"Yeah," she agreed firmly, at the same time admitting to herself that she wouldn't have wanted to go alone.

They were interrupted just then by someone Lois had been trying to avoid. "Lois! You haven't made an appointment to see me yet - how about now?"

Looking desperately towards Clark for a means of escape, Lois grunted, "Dr Carlin, I... well, Clark and I are a little busy right now."

Clark shrugged. "Nothing I can't handle alone."

She glared at him; couldn't he see she didn't want to be grilled by a shrink? But he was already walking off towards his desk; there was no escape.

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Clark wasn't at all sure he'd done the right thing leaving Lois at the mercy of Dr Carlin, since he was well aware of her views on psychiatrists. But he also felt that she did need to talk to someone - it was obvious just from looking at her that she wasn't over things yet. And if she wouldn't talk to him... maybe she would talk to a professional

That, however, didn't stop him checking his watch every five minutes and trying to prevent himself using his Super-hearing just to check that she was okay in the office Dr Carlin was using as a temporary consulting-room. He hadn't heard any screams yet, so she was probably okay... he hoped.

He still wasn't sure just what her feelings were about the man she had almost married. Had she loved Luthor? He wasn't sure, though he was inclined to think not... though sometimes he woke up at nights breathing heavily from a nightmare where Lois told him she \*had\* loved Lex and would never be able to love anyone ever again. But how could she have loved Luthor when the day she'd accepted his proposal she had pleaded with Superman to love her? That was the one thing which had given him hope over the past few weeks.

Now, she had just told him that she would never accept anything from Luthor's estate. That didn't seem to indicate much fondness for the man she would have married if Perry hadn't burst in with Henderson and half of Metropolis PD at just the right second. He knew the ceremony had reached the part where it was Lois's turn to say 'I do.' His gut twisted as he considered what would have happened had Perry been even a minute later. Lois would have been married to Luthor; would now be his widow. How would he have coped had she been the new owner of LexCorp and all of Luthor's business interests?

But he dismissed the objection. She would still have been Lois, regardless of her status. And he would still be in love with her.

He pushed his thoughts away and concentrated on the interview he had to write up.

After an hour and a half Lois finally emerged, looking subdued, and headed straight for her desk without looking at him. He left her

alone for a minute or two before getting up and walking over.

"You okay?"

She shrugged. "I hate shrinks."

"You were in there a while." He deliberately kept his voice even.

A pause. Then, "Well, I suppose I got a few things off my chest."

Deliberately striking a brighter note this time, he smiled and said, "That sounds good."

"Yeah. Well, I'm fine now," she insisted.

He smiled wryly; her response was hardly a surprise. "Quick healing," he murmured ironically. "Can you be ready to leave in half an hour? The will reading," he reminded her, at her questioning expression.

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The reading, to Lois's surprise, took place in Lex's penthouse office suite. It was quite a shock to walk into that room again, and even more so to find it full of lawyers, businessmen and journalists. Much of Lex's furniture was still there, and she was positive she could even smell the aroma of his expensive cigars.

She slipped into a seat at the back of the room, letting Clark sit beside her; the reading was about to start, which was a relief. She really didn't want to cope with any more of the curious glances and overtly disbelieving stares which had started as soon as she and Clark had walked in.

The first half-hour or so contained nothing of any real interest: most of Lex's effects went to charity or business associates. But suddenly, just as it seemed the dry-voiced lawyer was drawing his recitation to a close, his next statement shocked Lois to the core.

"... and a special annuity for his ex-wife, Mrs A.C. Luthor."

Lois sat frozen, unable to believe what she'd heard. His \*ex-wife\*? Lex had been married before? Who was she? \*Where\* was she? Why wasn't she here today? Or maybe she was here...?

Clark touched her arm gently. "Are you okay?"

She turned to him, staring at him in disbelief. "I can't believe it. He never said a word of it. That lying, no-good...."

Clark shushed her, reminding her subtly by his actions that they were in public and that there was a room full of reporters who would be only too happy to see the once-future Mrs Lex Luthor thoroughly discomfited by the knowledge that her almost-husband had been married before.

But she didn't want to stay silent. Lowering her voice, she muttered, "He was married, Clark. And all those times he told me I was his

first true love."

"Lois...." Clark protested again, offering comfort by his body language as he tried to shield her from the view of the others in the room, but still trying to remind her that they weren't alone.

"I'd like to meet the woman who said 'I do' before I did... almost did... didn't," she muttered viciously.

Touching her arm gently, Clark murmured, "Let's go." He hurried Lois out of the room ahead of the others, whisking her into the elevator before anyone could follow them. She slumped against the wall as the elevator travelled downwards, her eyes closed.

"\*Are\* you okay, Lois?" Clark asked again, concerned.

She pulled a face. "As okay as any woman would be who just found out her fiance \*lied\* to her! Okay, it's not the only thing he lied to me about, but he didn't need to lie to me about that! I mean, they were divorced, so why should it bother me? No, don't answer that, Clark!"

She opened her eyes to see him leaning against the opposite wall, watching her with a concerned expression. "Clark, I'll be fine," she assured him impatiently. "It was a shock, okay? But you don't have to start the suicide alert. And you \*definitely\* don't need to tell Perry about this, you hear? He'll only send me to see Dr Carlin again, and I've had enough of shrinks for one day. So you better not breathe a word of this...."

"Lois, you should know me by now," Clark replied evenly, though there was an undertone of annoyance to his voice. "We're partners. Friends. We look out for each other. You don't want me to tell Perry, I won't. But I really wish you'd let me - "

The elevator had stopped, and Lois brushed past him into the foyer. "Clark, I am \*fine.\* Okay? Now please just let me get on with my life!"

He joined her, keeping what seemed like a deliberate distance from her. "Fine, Lois. Excuse me for caring about you, okay?" He sounded annoyed, and for a moment she regretted her determination to keep her distance. But then she remembered their conversation outside the bombed-out Planet, and her heart hardened.

Back at the Planet, Lois found herself unable to forget that moment when she'd learned about the former Mrs Luthor; somehow, of all the deceptions she had found out about over the past weeks, that one seemed the worst. About halfway through the afternoon, near to tears suddenly, she collected her things and switched off her computer. Calling to Clark that she was going home early, she collected her Jeep and drove home on auto-pilot, tears pricking at her eyes during the entire journey.

\*\*\*\*\*

After Lois had left, Clark sat back in his chair tapping the end of his pencil thoughtfully against his chin. Despite his irritation with her as they'd left LexCorp, he had been worried about her since the end of the will-reading. It was obvious that her discovery that

Luthor had been married before had disturbed her greatly, despite her pretence that it hadn't. Her heart-rate had increased sharply at the mention of a previous wife, and it had taken a long time for it to return to normal. He had also noticed that she seemed unable to concentrate on anything once they'd returned to the Planet. Then she'd left abruptly, a couple of hours before normal departure time.

He was very tempted to rush after her to ensure that she was okay. But he hesitated; much though he was worried that the events at the will-reading had genuinely upset her far more than she'd pretended, he remembered her attitude when he'd tried to get her to talk earlier. Perhaps he should leave it for a while, and call her later, he thought.

He turned back to his work, though his conscience continued to nag him, insisting that Lois probably shouldn't be on her own right now.

Sighing, he considered. What was really bothering him was his fear that the discovery that Luthor had previously been married had been a catalyst - a catalyst for what? For Lois to face just what she had gone through over the past few weeks, he thought slowly. He \*knew\* she was still keeping her feelings suppressed, locked inside herself. She'd been running on auto-pilot since her wedding day. What if now was the time she was going to let it all out?

If she did that, what would happen? He was aware that a couple of weeks ago Perry had been afraid that she was close to a breakdown. She had seemed to drag herself back from that, but Clark, who knew her better than most, had seen that the apparently tight grip which she was holding on her feelings was simply a brittle exterior, masking the real emotions underneath. What if that exterior shattered?

In an instant, he made his decision. He would take the risk that she might throw him out; he was going to check on her regardless.

It took him longer than he'd intended to get away from the newsroom, however, since Perry caught him and demanded that he write up one of their stories before he left. Even with surreptitious Super-speed he wasn't able to complete it in under half an hour. Finally, he was able to go; he ducked into an alley behind the Planet and less than a second later was airborne.

Minutes later, Superman circled slowly above Lois's apartment building, scanning to see what she was doing. What he saw made his breath catch painfully in his throat, and he regretted his slowness in leaving the Planet to check on her. Another thought sent him flying back to his own apartment briefly before returning and landing in the alley around the corner from Lois's building. Seconds later, Clark was knocking on the door of apartment 105.

Lois didn't answer, not that he expected her to. He knocked louder, this time calling her name, but there was still no response, until after several knocks he heard her mutter, "Go away. Leave me alone." Sure that he wouldn't even have heard that without his enhanced hearing, he grimaced before taking a small metal item out of his pocket. He didn't like invading Lois's privacy, but he had no intention of leaving her alone. He inserted her spare key, one she

had given him a few months ago so that he could feed her fish in her absence, in the lock and opened the door.

She was crouched in the middle of the floor, with the curtains drawn so that there was little light in the room. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she savagely attacked some white fabric by raking a knife through it repeatedly. At least, the fabric had been white, Clark noted; there were now bright red streaks all over it. Blood - Lois's blood. His gut twisted as he realised suddenly just what she was doing. The fabric was her wedding dress, and she was ripping it to shreds. But she wasn't paying attention to what she was doing, and her hands were covered in slashes. That explained the blood, he realised.

She seemed oblivious to his presence, continuing to drag the knife in rough, ragged slashes through the tatters of what had once been a ridiculously-expensive silk and lace designer dress. He moved silently, floating rather than walking, into the bathroom and collected what he needed before returning to her side. As he crouched down beside her, he deliberately made his movements gentle in order not to startle her; she had injured herself enough already.

Before she was aware of his presence, he had closed his hand firmly over the one which held the knife. He felt her start, and her head shot up to stare at him. His heart tightened again at the sight of her face: pale, cheeks blotchy with tears, her brown eyes blurred and reddened from crying.

He realised that even though she was looking at him, she wasn't really seeing him, and he seized his opportunity to ease the knife from the tight grip her fingers had around it, and threw it to the floor. With great tenderness he took her small hands in his own larger ones so that he could examine her wounds. Taking the cloth, he dipped it in the disinfectant solution he had brought from the bathroom and proceeded to bathe her hands gently. She winced and whimpered in pain as he swiftly worked to wipe away the excess blood and clean the jagged slashes. Seeing that she was still barely aware of his presence, he slid his glasses down and risked a few gentle darts of heat vision on the worst of the cuts, sealing them and stopping the bleeding.

She was shaking, he realised, her entire body trembling as hot tears continued to flow from her eyes; some fell on his hands as he was holding hers. Once he had finished cleaning her hands, he wrapped his own clean handkerchief around the left one, which had taken the brunt of the damage. To his great relief, he judged that none of the cuts needed stitches. Murmuring softly and, he hoped, reassuringly to her, Clark then shifted his own body before gently lifting her until she was sitting on his lap on the floor, cradled in his arms. Whether or not she was by now aware of his presence, she instinctively rested her body against his, relaxing into him. She was cold, he realised, quickly darting some heat vision over her before she could be aware of what he was doing.

He continued to hold her silently for several minutes, stroking her hair gently, allowing her to become accustomed to his presence. He had never seen Lois so distressed before, and the sight of her tear-streaked face and the injuries to her hands, to say nothing of the sad, desperate expression he'd witnessed when he'd X-rayed her apartment, was tearing him apart. If only she'd talked to him; if

only she could have trusted him enough to tell him that she needed company, wanted a shoulder to cry on. He could have been with her; she would never have got to the point of hurting herself.

He didn't think that she'd deliberately mutilated herself. It looked as if she had decided, for some reason, to destroy her wedding dress - probably what she'd learned about Luthor earlier that day had proven the last straw, for some reason. He wasn't sure why that should be the case - \*had\* she actually been in love with him? Clark couldn't bring himself to believe that; even the thought of it made him feel sick. But Lois's injuries hadn't been deliberate, he was sure of that.

After a while, he shook her very gently. "Lois? Lois, talk to me. Please, Lois," he murmured, now wanting her to snap out of her trance-like state.

She sobbed again, loudly, then pulled back slightly from him, this time looking at him with eyes which did seem to take in her surroundings. "Cl... Clark?"

"I'm here, Lois." He hugged her lightly, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Oh, Clark!" she choked, burying her head in the crook of his shoulder. "Clark... it's all such a mess...." Huge gasping sobs prevented her from speaking then, and the tears began to flow again in earnest. Helpless, all Clark could do was hold her tightly against him, his hands stroking her back as he murmured meaningless words of comfort to her.

"Lois... that's it, let it all out," he urged softly. "You need to cry - come on, just let it go."

He lost track of time as they sat together on the floor; at one point he reflected that it was just as well he was Super-human, since he reasoned that any human male would have been suffering from cramp by that time. \*He\* was all right, though, and he would hold Lois, comfort her, for as long as she needed him.

Some time later, as the world outside the closed curtains grew dark, the great shaking sobs ceased and she began to stir. He relaxed his grip on her, allowing her to draw back from him. She pulled away, staring up at him with blurred eyes wet with her tears.

"Clark...."

"Sshh, it's okay, Lois," he soothed. "Take it easy."

She started to look around her, as if she was only beginning to realise where she was and what she had been doing. Her gaze fell on her wedding dress, the huge rents and the rust-coloured streaks clearly visible even in the darkened room. "What... did I do that?" she asked unevenly, her voice husky from crying.

"Don't worry about it," Clark urged, freeing one hand and pushing the remnants of the dress further away. "Lois, you need to talk about what made you do this."

"I...." She trailed off, seeming to find speech difficult.

Clark realised that she had probably been sobbing so much that she was hoarse. "Here - let me get you some water. Or tea - that might be better." He eased her from his lap and stood, but she clutched at him, her eyes wide and pleading.

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere," he reassured her. "Look, come with me." Taking her hand, he led her, childlike, into the kitchen where he put some water on to boil. Then, glancing again at her puffy cheeks and swollen eyes, he found a clean cloth and soaked it in cold water before bathing her eyes with it, combing her hair gently back from her face with his fingers simultaneously. She submitted quietly, seeming to trust him to take care of her.

He frowned; was she really aware of her surroundings, or was she still traumatised by the sudden outpouring of emotions? "Lois, can you hear me?"

Silence; then a slow nod.

"Okay, can you talk to me? Say my name?" He tilted her chin gently with his hand, urging her to meet his gaze.

She swallowed, then spoke carefully. "Cl...ar..." Her voice cracked as she tried to complete his name.

He smiled wryly before turning away to make the tea, deliberately putting a couple of spoons of sugar in hers - real sugar, not low-fat replacement. Right now, he guessed, she needed the energy.

Not waiting for a protest, he swung her light body up into his arms and carried her back to the sitting room, where he placed her on the couch before returning to the kitchen for their drinks. When he came back, she was sitting exactly where he had left her, staring blankly in front of her. His heart turned over again to see the woman he loved clearly suffering so much - and all over Lex Luthor, he reminded himself grimly.

But he put those thoughts out of his mind as he took a seat next to her on the couch and wrapped her fingers around her drink. "Come on, you need to drink that, Lois, do you hear me?"

Obediently, she raised the cup to her lips, taking a sip. "Hot," she muttered, jerking her hands away from her mouth and almost spilling the drink. His Super-fast reactions prevented any damage being done, however, as he closed his hand about hers to steady her.

He blew gently on the liquid with his cooling Super-breath, then murmured, "Try again - it'll have cooled down now." She wasn't in any state to realise what he was doing, he reasoned with himself.

She did, and this time took a longer sip. This time she turned to face him, her eyes showing recognition. "Ugh... too sweet!" she protested.

He gave her a firm smile. "You need it. Come on, drink up." Shifting closer to her, he wrapped one arm warmly around her shoulders as he urged her again to drink. To his surprise she did as she was told, draining the mug. Taking it from her and depositing it on the occasional table, he drew her closer to him. "Ready to talk?"



She shrugged. "I guess." But she fell silent then, seeming content to rest against him.

"Was it today - finding out he'd been married before? That he lied to you about what you meant to him?" Clark asked cautiously, ignoring his certain knowledge that her answer to those questions could only dig the knife in his own wounds in deeper.

She paused, her hands clenching and twisting together. When she finally spoke, it was in a quiet, broken voice which Clark probably wouldn't have been able to hear properly without his enhanced senses. "I... guess... he did lie about that. He always told me I was the first woman who'd truly meant anything to him, the first woman he fell in love with. I really believed he meant it!" She stopped then, twisting the hem of her shirt between her fingers. "Clark, I know he lied about all sorts of things. I mean, I know that \*now.\* But this was personal. He had no reason to lie about how he felt about \*me\* - did he?"

Clark grimaced, unsure how to answer. He wasn't sure whether Lois knew what Luthor had intended for his wife: he had told her, deliberately, a couple of weeks earlier that Luthor had intended to control her, but he wasn't sure whether she had really assimilated his words at the time. It was clear to Clark that whatever the true nature of Luthor's feelings for Lois, the billionaire had actually wanted her as a sort of trophy wife. A beautiful woman, who would look magnificent dressed in jewels and designer clothes, but someone who was also intelligent, so that he would be bored neither in bed nor at the dinner-table. Her own life, her own interests, would very quickly have been submerged if not entirely abandoned in favour of his wishes.

Eventually, he asked carefully, "It bothers you that he lied about what you meant to him?"

She seemed to think about that for a long time. Finally, she shook her head. "I don't know, Clark," she whispered. "I mean, with everything else I've been finding out, this should be... well, I shouldn't be surprised. But, you know, even though I know now what he was really like, I guess I still thought he was sincere about his feelings for me."

Clark paused, then although it tore him apart to say it, he realised he had to offer Lois some comfort. "Maybe he was. I mean, we don't know anything about his first wife, Lois. The marriage could have been unhappy - maybe he never really loved her. So he could have been telling you the truth."

"And he could have been lying," she replied grittily. "Like every other man... every time I thought someone cared about me, they were lying. They let me down."

Stunned at this sweeping attack, Clark began to protest, "I never - " He broke off as he suddenly realised that as far as Lois was concerned he probably had let her down. He had abandoned her when she had needed his friendship, refusing to talk to her or even to contemplate attending her wedding, and he had cut off her 'confession' the day Franklin Stern bought the Planet. His logic for doing so was unimportant; what mattered was that Lois had felt let

down yet again.

He didn't want to dwell on that thought, so he gave her a little shake. "Talk to me, Lois. Tell me how you feel about him. You should have been married nearly three weeks ago - and I just got here to find you shredding your wedding dress. Talk to me."

She drew a long, shuddering breath. "Clark, I don't know. I couldn't ever have accepted his proposal if I'd known what he was like, you know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know," he reassured her softly. "Of course I know."

"And you tried to tell me," she remembered aloud. "And every time I thought you were just jealous...."

< I was, Lois....> "I never had any proof, that was the problem," he told her. "We didn't get the final proof until just before the ceremony, and then Perry had to convince Henderson...."

"I know," she whispered. "Perry explained.... He was a monster, wasn't he?"

Clark grimaced, not wanting to cause her further pain. He still wasn't sure just how much her feelings had been involved; okay, she had accepted Luthor's proposal on the same day she had pleaded with Superman to return her love. But that didn't mean she'd never had any feelings for the man. "Lois..." he began carefully. "I know you've read the stories, seen the coverage on TV...."

"Yeah, and there's more to come, isn't there?" she demanded.

Clark studied her: she had pulled away from him slightly and was gazing at him pleadingly. He couldn't lie to her. "Yes, there's more. Worse. Superman always thought he was behind the Messenger sabotage, and Dr Platt's death, and the police are close to proving it. And the heatwave? That was deliberate sabotage, not just an accidental leak. And...." He hesitated, not wishing to cause her further pain, "You do know he was really behind the Toasters?"

She stared at him, amazed. "But... that was Toni Taylor?"

Clark shook his head. "She was the front operation. Luthor was paying her - until it started to go wrong, when he double-crossed her. We've only just found out, so it hasn't been reported yet. She's given a statement now that he's dead, and I believe her. It all adds up. Remember his plans for developing the Riverview area?"

Lois nodded, her expression indicating that she accepted Clark's word. "Clark, what I can't... what I just can't forget is that I was almost that monster's wife!" She shuddered again, and he drew her closer again. "I wake up in the middle of the night shaking because I've dreamed he's still alive and I'm married to him," she confessed shakily, the tears beginning to flow again.

Clark hugged her tightly, wishing there was some way he could banish her nightmares. "You're not married to him, Lois. Perry and Henderson stopped the wedding in time. You never said 'I do.'"

< \*I\* stopped the wedding before Perry arrived> Lois corrected

silently, realising in that instant that Clark didn't know. She was about to tell him when he interrupted her.

"Lois, have you eaten? I'm going to make you some food and we'll talk some more after you've eaten, okay?"

She hadn't eaten since breakfast, she suddenly remembered as she realised that what had prompted Clark's suggestion had been her stomach rumbling. She protested a little as he eased himself out from behind her on the couch; he smiled a little and assured her that he wasn't going far.

As Clark started to examine the contents of her refrigerator and cupboards, Lois's attention was caught again by the ruins of her wedding dress on the floor. She knelt beside it, taking in the damage; a moment later Clark was beside her.

"I'll get rid of that if you want," he offered, reaching out to take the shredded gown.

She shook her head. "Later." Gazing up at him in disbelief, she asked, "I really did this?"

"Yeah," he confirmed. "I came in to find you ripping at it with a kitchen knife. That's how you cut your hands."

Lois looked at her hands as if noticing the cuts and Clark's makeshift bandage for the first time. She barely remembered any of it, certainly not injuring herself. She turned her head and suddenly caught sight of the knife, which now lay under the coffee-table. "I used that?" she asked.

Clark bent to pick it up. "Yeah - you were gripping it pretty hard. I had to use both hands to take it from you."

"I didn't know what I was doing...." she whispered. "Clark - I could have hurt you!"

"You wouldn't have done that," he insisted. "Once you realised you weren't alone any more you stopped trying to shred the dress. You were just holding the knife when I took it from you." He sighed. "I should have come over sooner. I knew you weren't okay, no matter what you said."

Quickly, she shook her head, appalled at Clark's assumption of blame. "No! It wasn't your fault - you're not responsible for me."

But Clark wouldn't accept that. "We're friends, Lois. Friends look out for each other."

Lois fell silent, trying to come to terms with what had happened, what she had apparently been doing. The last thing she remembered with any clarity was driving herself home from the Planet, and she had to admit that she hadn't been in full control of herself then. She barely remembered getting back to the apartment, and she had no recollection at all of digging out her wedding dress from the back of the wardrobe where she'd bundled it a couple of weeks ago, when she'd finally unpacked. Realising now that she'd been completely out of control and that she could have seriously injured herself was a huge shock.

She rocked back on her heels, staring wide-eyed at Clark, her face pale. "Clark... I must have been going crazy...."

He was kneeling in front of her suddenly, his hands gripping her shoulders. "Not crazy. You were finally letting it all out - Lois, it's been nearly three weeks! And my guess is this is the first time you've let yourself cry, isn't it?"

She nodded, her breath ragged. "People kept telling me I should cry - I should grieve. But what am I grieving for, Clark? He was a \*monster\*! I couldn't have married him!"

"I know, Lois," he whispered. Gently, he lowered his head and brushed his lips softly, fleetingly, against her forehead. "But you were going to be married. You'd made all your plans, you were ready to move in with him as his wife - you were \*already\* living in his apartment! You were all prepared for your new life, as his wife and as a senior journalist at LNN - you lost a lot when your wedding fell apart," he pointed out, trying not to let his own feelings show in his voice. The thought that Lois might actually have married Lex Luthor still gave him nightmares, so he was entirely able to understand her own disturbed nights. The possibility that she might have been sleeping with her fiancé during those couple of days before the wedding when she'd had her own suite in his penthouse had caused him enough pain as it was. He grimaced suddenly as he remembered one more thing. "And you saw him commit suicide right in front of you."

Lois winced. Clark was right: the sight of her fiancé plummeting to the ground from the top floor of the tallest building in Metropolis was another image which filled her nightmares. Suddenly tears were pricking at her eyes again, but this time somehow she knew they were cleansing tears, unlike the ragged sobs of earlier. She relaxed into Clark's arms as she allowed the tears to fall again.

Clark held her again until the crying passed, pressing her head into the hollow of his shoulder and murmuring soft endearments to her, endearments some tiny conscious part of her knew he would never use under normal circumstances, if she were not in such need of his comfort. All the memories she had been suppressing over the past couple of weeks, all her nightmares about what her life would have been like had she actually married Lex and his criminal acts hadn't been uncovered, had finally emerged to the surface and her mind was finally forcing her emotions to deal with them. She had needed to cry long before this, she knew that now. Telling herself she was okay, that she was coping, had been simply an exercise in self-delusion.

Her father had been right - Sam Lane had been calling her regularly, every couple of days, to check on her, and he had frequently told her that she needed to talk about things and to allow herself to grieve, to get angry or otherwise vent her emotions. Clark had told her the same thing, less forcefully, when he had pleaded with her to talk to him. Her mother had several times urged her to see a therapist - and Perry, of course, had insisted that she talk to Ariana Carlin.

Lois hadn't wanted to talk to Dr Carlin, and even though when she'd finally talked to the psychiatrist the interview had lasted over an hour, she hadn't felt that a rapport had been established. Instead,

it had occurred to her to wonder whether the doctor had a hidden agenda - there had been something a little strange about some of the comments Dr Carlin had made. Certainly that had not been a therapeutic experience.

However, being held and comforted by Clark was immensely therapeutic, Lois realised as her tears dried up and a sense of inner peace began to flow within her. He was communicating his own strength and caring to her, silently, by his gestures and caresses. She had forgotten just how good it felt to be hugged by her partner and friend; in that moment, she remembered the morning she'd been almost strangled in this very apartment. Clark had rescued her, and had held her in his arms on the kitchen floor. She had clung to him as if she never wanted him to let her go; and his embrace had felt so warm, so protective... so comforting.

Just like it felt now. Of course, Clark had a very strong, powerfully-muscled body, but he knew how to disguise his strength when necessary. In some ways, he was the gentlest man she knew. He also cared for her very much, regardless of what he'd said that day outside the Planet. That thought hit Lois suddenly out of nowhere. He *\*cared\** about her. He might not be in love with her, but he cared. He had never stopped caring.

And she had decided to believe that he had stopped caring, because he'd distanced himself while she was engaged to Lex, and because of what he'd said about not being in love with her. But that had been a stupid conclusion to draw. He'd never said he didn't care, and his behaviour over the past couple of weeks told her, without his needing to, that he did. He had done his best to shield her from the worst of the Planet gossip about Lex, and she knew that he - and Perry, admittedly - had ripped on a couple of staff members who had dared joke about Luthor or Lois in her hearing. And he had accompanied her to the will-reading today, not because he wanted to go, but because he knew she did and he hadn't wanted her to face that alone.

Stirring a little against him, she murmured, "Clark, you're such a great friend. I'm so lucky to have you."

His arms tightened around her momentarily before he released her. "Food. I promised to feed you, and I will. Ten minutes, okay?"

Lois nodded. Suddenly she became conscious that her clothes were crumpled and that her face must be blotchy from crying. "Sure. Thanks. Umm... I think I'll go get cleaned up, okay?"

She escaped into the bathroom and examined the evidence in the mirror, grimacing as she saw the reflection which stared back at her. How could Clark have looked at her and not grimaced? But that was how a good friend should behave, she supposed. Never judges, never condemns. And never tells you you're looking terrible, even when you are! And with Clark, she didn't have to feel embarrassed about coming back out dressed in a sloppy T-shirt and faded jeans, her face scrubbed clean of make-up.

The cuts on her hands were also a frightening reminder of how far from her right mind she had been when Clark had arrived. She had absolutely no recollection of getting the knife, let alone using it. But she had slashed that dress to ribbons, and inflicted injuries to

herself in the process. Clark had done a good job of first-aid on her, she could see that. She was just lucky that none of the cuts was deep enough to need stitches.

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In the kitchen, as he made his mother's special scrambled eggs, Clark listened to Lois using his Super-hearing. She seemed a lot calmer now: her heartbeat had returned to normal and she was no longer crying. He hoped that the worst was over for her.

< Clark, you're such a great friend> she had told him. He smiled wryly; he'd heard that one a few times before. But this time, he realised, he was actually glad to hear her say it. Their friendship had been through a very rough patch, and he considered himself fortunate that it seemed to have survived. Right now, he'd rather have Lois as a friend than as nothing at all; his more romantic feelings for her could take a back seat for the moment. As he acknowledged that, he remembered the decision he'd made outside the burned-out Planet the day after Lois's abortive wedding: he'd resolved then to settle for keeping her friendship instead of risking that he might lose it if a rebound relationship went wrong. Yes, that had been the right decision, he felt.

Sirens interrupted his thought processes suddenly: there was a big fire a few miles away. Instinctively he started to move, trying to think of an excuse for his departure; then he hesitated. He didn't \*need\* to go, did he? The emergency services could cope. He didn't think he was being selfish in wanting to stay with Lois for a bit longer; it seemed to Clark that if she could be encouraged to talk more about the last couple of months it might help her.

Not that he particularly wanted to hear about her experiences with Lex Luthor, but if his guess was right she'd been bottling up so many things, refusing to talk about them, that she'd nearly driven herself to a breakdown. Now that she had started to open up, she needed company. Yes, he decided suddenly, the fire service could deal with the emergency on its own. If it \*really\* became necessary, he'd find a way to leave briefly, but not otherwise.

He had just put the plates on the table when Lois emerged, and they chatted easily as they ate. She seemed anxious to avoid the subject of her tears and their cause, and Clark didn't want to push the issue. However, once they'd finished and he had made them both some coffee, he followed her back to the couch and studied her thoughtfully.

"So - you want to talk about your engagement?"

Lois seemed surprised that he had asked the question, and she grimaced. "Not particularly." She was silent for a few moments before raising her gaze to meet his. "I suppose I should - you think?"

Clark shrugged. "I'm no psychiatrist, Lois, but I think it might help."

"\*You\* don't want to hear about it!" she told him. "I know how you felt about Lex, Clark. You wouldn't even accept the wedding invitation, even though I pleaded with you."

He nodded. "I know. Lois, I just couldn't watch you do it...." He broke off, grimacing, before continuing. "Look, it's all over now and it doesn't bother me, okay? I think you need to talk about it, though."

She nodded agreement. "I guess I do. I've been trying to block it out, and that just doesn't work. It's just... Clark, it was so \*horrible\* to find out that the man I'd decided to marry was a criminal! And everything I found out he did... you know, I've been remembering times I spent with him, things we did together, and realising what he had to have been plotting at the same time - it's frightening to realise how cold-blooded he was about it all!" She got to her feet and began to pace about the room. "You know, he took me to Paris, and proposed on the plane on the way back. I thought that was so romantic. And now I know that at the same time he was plotting his takeover of the Planet, and probably arranging the bombing then too!"

"Probably," Clark agreed. "Lois, don't - "

Before he could say more, Lois had interrupted him again. "But what does that say for my judgement as a reporter, Clark? I thought I was so good, you know? The best. And yet I was completely taken in."

"You \*are\* the best, Lois," Clark insisted quietly. "You always have been, and you still are. Look, Luthor was pretty smart - he hid his tracks very well. Very few people had any suspicions about him."

"You did," she pointed out, giving him a meaningful glance.

Clark shrugged helplessly; he couldn't tell her the whole truth, but.... "It was partly jealousy, Lois - you seemed so wrapped up in him at times, and that made me feel... excluded, I guess. So I didn't like him anyway. And - well, then Superman told me he was suspicious."

"I never meant to make you feel excluded!" Lois exclaimed. "Clark, I'm sorry...." She reached out, placing a hand lightly on his arm, before continuing. "Superman told you - and not me?"

Clark sighed. "I guess he thought he didn't have enough proof - well, you know that." He had to ask the question then, no matter how he dreaded the answer. "Lois - were you in love with Luthor?"

She hesitated, which made Clark fear the worst. But then she frowned at him. "I really don't know - no, that's not true. I guess I was in love with the idea of being with someone like Lex - or at least like the person I thought Lex was. Not his money, but his power. I was attracted to his power and influence, and he was pretty charming. It was hard to be with him and \*not\* feel flattered by his interest. But...." She paused and looked straight at Clark. "No, I wasn't in love with him. You know... you must have known how I felt about... about Superman," she finished in little more than a whisper.

Clark grimaced, remembering Superman's conversation with Lois in this very room. "Yeah, I knew," he agreed.

"I think I went a little crazy," she admitted. "I asked Superman... well, anyway, I finally realised that I was just deluding myself to think that he might actually care for me. And that wasn't easy to accept, you know?"

Clark nodded, realising where Lois was leading with this. Was she going to tell him that it was Superman's rejection of her which had sent her into Luthor's arms? His gut twisted as he reminded himself that he had already faced up to that possibility. He knew he could have handled that conversation with Lois very differently. Instead, he had been unnecessarily cruel, and he had hurt her. She had been rejected by the man she thought she loved, and so she had gone instead to the man who had claimed to love her.

But there had been *another* man who had told her he loved her... and she hadn't chosen to run to him. She had rejected Clark, first for Superman and then for Luthor. That had hurt; it still hurt. He could probably have lived with being turned down for his Super alter ego, but to be rejected in favour of Lex Luthor was something he would feel bitter about for a long time to come.

But he didn't want to remind Lois about that now. It looked as if their friendship was back on track, and he had no intention of risking it by reminding her that her best friend had declared his love for her and been rejected.

Lois crossed back to sit beside Clark. "I'm not going to blame Superman for what I did. It wasn't his fault - and anyway, I'm an adult. I should take responsibility for my own actions. Yeah, what he said to me did hurt, but *I* made the decision to accept Lex's proposal. It wasn't something I'd no choice about. I mean, I didn't have to get married to anyone. But Lex had asked, and... I suppose what really motivated it was that everything in my life seemed to have turned upside down. Nothing was the same any more. The Planet was gone, Perry was retiring. I was working at LNN and I never saw any of you guys any more. And you and I were hardly able to talk without fighting. The only constant was Lex, and I knew he wanted me. So I suppose it was easy to say yes."

So she wasn't claiming that Superman drove her to it, Clark thought. Not that it mattered; he still felt guilty. He knew there were other ways he could have handled it; for starters, Superman could actually have told Lois about his suspicions, instead of allowing her to accept the proposal of a murderer and criminal mastermind. But he had allowed his pride to get in the way.

"You know, Clark," Lois continued thoughtfully, "It wasn't until it was all over that I realised just how Lex had manipulated me. I said he seemed to be the one constant in my life when everything else was falling apart. The Planet had gone - but that was *his* doing. He bought the Planet, and then bombed it, just so I'd be cut off from my job and my friends. He then installed me in LNN where I was part of *his* world. Perry retired. Jack was arrested. I never saw Jimmy, and you...." She winced suddenly. "You didn't want to know me because of Lex. He understood that - for all his sympathetic noises about how I should try to keep in touch, he knew he'd managed to separate me from everyone and everything I cared about."

Clark sighed, again feeling guilty about his own part in things. "Lois, I was to blame too. I didn't have to let Luthor keep me apart



from you - but I drove a wedge between us all by myself. When you were dating him, I never wanted to talk about him except to criticise you for seeing him. So you couldn't really ask me for advice once he'd proposed. Then after the Planet went up, I insisted on treating you as if you'd gone over to the enemy. \*I\* abandoned our friendship - I let you down."

Lois reached for him, taking his large hand between her two smaller ones. "Clark, it wasn't your fault. It takes two, and I... I was selfish. I abandoned everyone and went to work at LNN - while the rest of you worked hard to find the Planet's bombers. You never stopped believing it could be done, Clark. I just gave up and let Lex take over more of my life."

"Lois, I could have done more to keep our friendship alive," Clark said heavily. "Okay, I didn't want to work at LNN, and I still think I was right to refuse. But I could have been nicer to you when you called me, and I didn't have to be as cold when we met in the street."

"I rejected you first," she whispered, then flushed as she realised she'd brought up the forbidden topic, the one she had sworn to herself she would never refer to again. Clark had withdrawn his declaration of love, and she had told him she agreed with his wish for the two of them. She shouldn't have mentioned that afternoon in Centennial Park; it was embarrassing to both of them.

Clark was silent for what seemed like several minutes, while Lois dipped her head, avoiding any chance of meeting his gaze. Then his hand squeezed hers and as she glanced up, he smiled wryly. "I should never have said anything to you then, Lois. You weren't ready to hear it. And I don't know why I thought it would have stopped you from marrying Luthor anyway."

< You weren't ready to hear it> Clark's comment sounded very strange to Lois. He'd said, the day after her abortive wedding, that he hadn't meant his declaration of love, that he had only said it to prevent her from accepting Lex's proposal. But \*this\* sounded as if he might have meant it after all.

For a second, she was tempted to ask him, but then decided that she didn't want to risk the answer being something she didn't want to hear. Instead, she gripped his hand tighter and stared at him intently. "Clark - I want my best friend back. Please?"

His expression was incredulous. "Lois - I never stopped being your best friend. Or wanting to be, anyway. I've been here, waiting for you to decide that you wanted me."

"Like this evening?" Lois asked quietly. "What made you come over here?"

He smiled slightly. "Lois, I've been expecting something like this to happen for the last couple of weeks. You were shutting everything up inside - you couldn't have carried on like that indefinitely. And I knew the will-reading today upset you. When you left early, I guessed you'd finally reached breaking point. I would have been here sooner except Perry made me finish up one of our stories before I could leave."

"I'm glad you came," she whispered.

"Me too."

Lois shifted closer to Clark, silently asking him to hold her. He read the message in her expression and his arms closed tightly around her, comforting her with his embrace.

Some time later, Lois shifted in her partner's arms and yawned heavily. "Sorry," she apologised with a wry smile. "I guess I haven't been sleeping well for weeks, and it's all catching up on me."

"You should get to bed," Clark urged her, concerned for her well-being. "Go on - I can let myself out. And if you want, I'll call for you in the morning. We can have breakfast together before going to work." He stood, tugging her gently so that she too was on her feet.

"Clark...?" Her expression was hesitant, pleading. "Don't go."

< Don't go... what did she want? > Clark stared at her in confusion. "You're tired out. Lois, go to bed, please. Get a good night's sleep."

"I'm... not sure I can," she whispered. "Clark... I told you I've been having nightmares. I've been staying up late every night, trying to tire myself out, hoping not to have them, but it happens almost every night."

Clark could see the pain, the fear in her face. But he couldn't see what she wanted him to do. Was she asking him to stay, to talk to her until she fell asleep or something? "Lois, you're falling asleep now," he pointed out.

"I know, but... Clark, please stay," she asked again. "I need you."

She needed him... how could he refuse her? "What do you want me to do, Lois?"

"Hold me," she told him simply. "If you're holding me tonight, I'll know I'm safe. I won't dream about... \*him.\* Or if I do, you'll be there."

It finally sunk in - she wanted him to sleep with her. In her bed, holding her next to him. It said a lot for her trust in him that she wanted him to do it. But could he trust himself? Already his body was beginning to react to the mental image building in his mind, of Lois snuggled against him, her warm, fragrant body cradled against his, his arms around her and his face pressed against her hair. It was obvious that she had no idea what she was asking. She simply saw a friend, someone she trusted implicitly and wanted to take care of her. She didn't see him as a man, a man, furthermore, who found her incredibly attractive and was in love with her.

But.... He could do it, he resolved firmly. He wasn't an over-eager teenager. He was a mature adult, and he could handle his hormones. If Lois needed him to hold her tonight, then he would do just that. And he'd never let her see just what torture she was putting him through.

"Okay, Lois, I'll stay," he agreed, keeping his tone light. "Umm... maybe I'd better go home first to get something to sleep in?"

"No!" she protested quickly. "I've got a spare toothbrush, and I'm sure I can find something for you to wear...."

She really seemed to be afraid of being left alone, Clark realised. His only remaining concern was the suit he was wearing under his clothes; he would have to find a means of hiding that from her. And of making sure she didn't see his face without his glasses. He couldn't wear them in bed! And, he realised quickly, there was the problem of what to do if Superman was needed during the night. But he swiftly decided that unless there was a major emergency, Superman could take the night off. Lois needed him and, he reasoned, after the way he had found her earlier it could be a bad idea to leave her on her own.

Disposing of the Suit was easy in the end: after finding him a pair of very baggy shorts Lois disappeared into the bathroom. While she was washing Clark flew home at Super-speed, leaving the Suit behind and pulling on a T-shirt under his work shirt instead. He was back before she had emerged from the bathroom.

"I can do this," Clark muttered to himself as he brushed his teeth. < Yeah, sure> a little voice taunted him. < Your brain's saying you can - but has anyone asked your body?>

But in the end it was easier than he'd thought. Lois was already in bed when he returned to the bedroom dressed in the shorts and T-shirt, and all but one small bedside light had been extinguished. He hesitated, then joined her beneath the covers. She looked so small and vulnerable lying there that his instinctive response was to want to protect her. Climbing into bed beside her, he laid his glasses on the nightstand and instantly reached to switch off the light.

A few moments later Lois shifted so that she was lying with her head on his shoulder; he brought his arm up to hold her against him, using his free hand to stroke her hair. Clark had almost despaired of ever being able to get this close to Lois; although he wanted much more than being the platonic friend she trusted not to take advantage of her, he delighted in the sensation of her lying in his arms.

After a few minutes, she murmured quietly, "You don't snore, do you, Clark?"

He smiled a little at that. "Not as far as I know. But... well, I've never shared a room or a bed with anyone before, so no-one's told me I do."

Clark's reply shocked Lois. He'd never shared a bed with anyone before... did that mean what she thought it did? Was he a virgin...? Well, if he was, she thought, swiftly quelling her curiosity, it was his business. Nothing to do with her. And anyway, it wasn't necessary to share a bed to have sex.

But all the same.... Unable to prevent herself, she repeated, "You've \*never\* shared a bed...?"

Clark was silent for several moments, and she thought she might have

offended him with her inquisitiveness. But then she felt him smile again before replying, "Well, you see, Lois, the one time it could have happened you wouldn't share. You wouldn't alternate either...." He laughed aloud as she thumped his shoulder.

"Oh, Clark!" Lois exclaimed, half-laughing and half-sobbing. "I've missed this, so much!"

< Missed what?> Clark was confused again; this, sharing a bed, was entirely new to them. But she explained quickly.

"I've missed the way you always know how to make me laugh," she told him. "I haven't had a lot of that in the last couple of months."

< Me neither, Lois> Clark thought wryly, but decided not to voice his thoughts. The nightmare was over and Lois was finally recovering; the less he said about his own feelings the better.

"Clark, tell me something," Lois asked him suddenly, having just remembered something he'd said to her about a week ago. "You told me Lex only ever wanted to control me - I guess you were right about that, and I more or less came to that conclusion myself today. But... how did you know?"

He hated having to use the excuse, but he had little choice. "Luthor told Superman, and he told me." Seeing that his reply had aroused Lois's curiosity, he explained. "Luthor sent for Superman the night before your wedding. It was all a ruse, but that's not important now. He tried to talk Superman into attending the wedding, and he started talking about you. About how you were a little too independent for his taste, but that he would do something about that once the two of you were married."

Lois gasped. "He said that?"

"Yeah."

"And... Superman didn't tell me?" Lois sounded horrified. "I know I was... a little crazy while all this stuff was going on, but if Superman had told me I'd have called off the engagement then. I think I would, anyway."

Clark grimaced. "He couldn't have, Lois. Luthor trapped him, held him prisoner. He would have killed Superman if he could."

"But... \*how\*?" Lois was incredulous. "Nothing can kill Superman - or hold him prisoner."

"Remember Kryptonite?" Clark asked quietly. "Yes, it exists, and it is lethal to Superman. Luthor trapped him in a kryptonite cage. Luthor intended to kill him, but Superman escaped just in time. The Kryptonite had taken away his powers, which was why he wasn't able to catch Luthor when he jumped."

Lois was silent for several long moments. "I never knew," she said at last. "He really was a monster." Clark stroked her hair silently, not trusting himself to say any more. Perhaps he would tell her the truth about himself and Superman some time soon, but now was not the right time, and he didn't want to let anything slip by accident.

"It was poetic justice," she added at last. "Superman couldn't save him because of what he'd done to Superman." She grimaced, then added, "I wouldn't have wanted him killed, but I'm not sorry he died. It was his own fault."

"I know it's hard to forget him when he's still making headlines every day, but you need to try," Clark murmured. "It's over, he's out of your life."

"Yeah, and I've been behaving like he's still controlling me," Lois replied thoughtfully. "Haven't I? That's why I've been keeping you at arm's length, and pretending I'd forgotten what it's like to feel real emotion." She fell silent again, and Clark simply continued to stroke her hair.

"Yeah, he's out of my life," Lois said firmly. "And I want my life back, Clark!"

"Then take it," he told her simply. "It's your decision."

"Yeah." She yawned then, suddenly feeling very sleepy. "Clark - thanks. For being there for me - for still being my friend."

Clark closed his eyes briefly at her words. Yes, he was her friend, and always would be as long as she let him. But he also loved her, and as she settled herself for sleep nestling against him spoon-fashion, he hoped that he would get the opportunity, some time in the future, to tell her what she really meant to him without fear of rejection.

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Lois came slowly to consciousness, realising that there was an unfamiliar weight around her waist. Puzzled, she lay still for a few moments as she tried to work out what it was; then some other clues filtered into her mind. Breathing - there was someone breathing close to her. And... she stretched her leg backwards; there was definitely another body in the bed with her. A \*male\* body, judging by the roughness of the hairs on the leg she was touching.

She frowned briefly, only to relax as she remembered asking Clark to stay with her. She was in bed with Clark, and it was him who was holding her close to him; his warm body curled against hers.

Clark's body...?

She stilled suddenly as she realised that his hips were also pressed close to hers, and that... even though he seemed to be asleep still, he was showing definite signs of interest. Sexual interest.

Did that mean...? But he'd told her he didn't love her!

< Stupid, Lois!> she chided herself. It was an automatic reaction on the part of men; their hormones simply worked in a peculiar way, and most men tended to wake up with... that reaction. Probably because most men dreamed about sex. It didn't mean that \*she\* had caused his reaction in any way.

Grateful that he seemed to be asleep still, she eased herself gently

from under his arm and slid out of the bed, padding silently into the bathroom. Shower first, then the least she could do was make breakfast for her guest. After all, thanks to him she'd had the best night's sleep she'd managed in weeks. Whether it was as a result of unburdening to Clark the night before, or simply because she knew he had been holding her, she had experienced no nightmares. She had slept soundly, and for the first morning in weeks felt rested and able to face the day.

Now that she'd finally given in and talked to him, Lois found it hard to understand why she'd resisted Clark's overtures of friendship for so long. She had deliberately been shutting him out, despite having indicated to him pretty clearly, outside both LexCorp and the Planet, that as far as she was concerned he was still her friend. He had tried so many times over the past couple of weeks to get her to open up to him, or even just to spend time with him rather than being on her own. She had known exactly what he was trying to do, even when he'd accused her of having lost her nerve. Her best friend had been looking out for her in the way he knew best.

She had kept him at a distance because of his strange behaviour, though. As she turned her face up to the shower-spray, Lois realised that she still hadn't got any explanation from him as to why he had told her he loved her and then withdrawn his words. She really didn't believe his story about having been willing to tell her anything to stop her marrying Lex. After all, why would he assume that the knowledge that Clark Kent loved her would stop her? She had never given him any reason to think that she cared for him in that way... although she had been pretty sure for some time that *he* did. No, if Clark had intended to fabricate something in order to persuade her, then surely he would have invented some story about Lex's wrongdoing instead? That might have had more of an impact on her at the time.

So, if she didn't believe what Clark had said about his motives that day outside the Planet, what did she believe? That he'd *meant* it when he'd said he loved her in the first place?

And if he had... why had he withdrawn his words?

And... how did she feel about it?

The first question was possibly easier to answer, Lois reasoned as she massaged shampoo into her hair. Clark had known... well, he thought... that she didn't love him. And Lex was dead, the Planet was about to re-open and all would be back to normal. The two of them would be working together again, just like before. Except that lying between them, unresolved, would have been the fact that Clark had declared his love for her and she had rejected him. That could have damaged their friendship, and their working relationship, quite badly. She would have been continually aware of the fact that he'd said he loved her, and her behaviour could have alternated between impatience and concern not to hurt him. It would have made life difficult for both of them.

So in order to get their relationship back on a normal footing, Clark had told her he hadn't meant it. But... she was now very sure that the lie had come outside the Planet, not that afternoon in Centennial Park. His words to her just the previous evening seemed to confirm her suspicions: he'd said he shouldn't have said anything because

'you weren't ready to hear it.' That was a long way from saying that he'd lied about his feelings.

So... Clark loved her - or at least, he had. Whether he still did was unclear.

And... how did she feel about it all?

Confused, was the short answer. That day outside the Planet she had been ready to tell him that she loved him too, that it has been thought of him and their relationship which had made her stop the wedding even before Perry arrived. But what would have happened if she \*had\* told him that, then? They probably would have embarked on a relationship. But... Lois paused, admitting to herself that she had been in no fit state to become involved with anyone at that time. Even now it would be a lousy idea. She had too much baggage to deal with: the previous evening's outburst had shown her that she still wasn't over the Lex phase. It wouldn't be fair to Clark if she started a relationship with him now, always assuming he still wanted to.

But at least they were best friends again, and it felt so \*good\* to have him back in her life. They would be friends, for now... if anything else was meant to be, it would happen when they were both ready. For now, Clark had proved his loyalty and friendship beyond doubt. It was time for her to trust him in return.

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Clark waited until the bathroom door had closed behind Lois before heaving a sigh of relief. Perhaps she hadn't noticed his reaction to her after all? When he'd woken up and realised how closely their bodies were pressed together, and exactly what had happened to his own body as a result, he had felt hugely embarrassed. She had trusted him to hold her and not to expect anything more. How could he explain what his body was no doubt telling her? 'Sorry, Lois, it's just... automatic. Men are like that'? < Oh yeah> he muttered to himself. < That's a great way to reassure her that she's safe with you!>

He concluded later, to his immense relief, that she mustn't have noticed. She never mentioned it, and over breakfast her mood was cheerful, much more like the old Lois. She was even able to mention Luthor's ex-wife with apparent ease, suggesting that they ought to try to track her down.

"Every newspaper in town is going to be after her," Lois pointed out. "We need to make sure we find her first."

"Well, yeah, that'd be good, but how do you propose we do that?" Clark asked, amused.

"Use our connections - get an inside track," Lois said with an exaggerated sigh. "Clark - I was engaged to the man! I know who his most trusted friends are - the ones who are still around, that is, and I also know how LNN operates. I can get past LNN, and I know who'll be only too happy to talk to us just to stop LNN getting the story first."

Clark listened to Lois's setting out of the plan of action with a

great sense of satisfaction. His old partner was well and truly back. For the first time since her wedding day, it seemed that she was able to refer to her ex-fiance with nothing more than impatience, and he really felt that, at last, she had been able to let go of her anger and despair.

"Okay," he agreed, grinning at her in amusement. "So, if we're to steal a march on the competition, hadn't we better get going?"

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Lois was secretly glad that Clark wanted to go to his apartment and change before heading to work, since it meant that they wouldn't be arriving together. Of course, if they'd gone with his original suggestion of having breakfast together on the way to work, they would have been arriving together in any case. But she wasn't ready for the newsroom gossips to start on the two of them. She'd had enough to cope with from them over the past couple of weeks as it was.

It wasn't that there would be anything new about the two of them spending time together outside the Planet, and having it known that they did so, she knew. In the days BL... before Luthor... they had been pretty constant companions. If Perry or one of the section heads had needed to get hold of Lois in a hurry and she hadn't answered her home phone or her pager, they usually tried Clark's number as a third option. But once she'd started seeing Luthor seriously, that had all changed.

Now, her friendship with Clark seemed to be back on its old footing, which she was very pleased about. She had missed him, very much, and it was so good to know that he still wanted to be her friend. It had been so comforting to be held by him last night; both in bed, and before that as well. He had been so reassuring, so sympathetic to her fears; somehow, the tears she had needed to cry for so long just came.

There weren't many men she could have asked to share her bed like that, Lois knew. Just about any other man she knew would automatically have assumed that sex was on the agenda, or would have tried to get it on the agenda, perhaps by telling her that she needed it to help her forget her ex-fiance. But Clark had understood all along that it wasn't what she was asking. He was a pretty special guy.

And that was why she wasn't prepared to risk their renewed friendship by setting it up for scrutiny by the gossips. She was sure that Clark, however embarrassed he might be, could deflect any gossip which came to him, but she was fed up with having her private life dissected in public. Some of the stories the tabloids had carried had really hurt. She wanted some privacy for a change.

She also needed time to think... to come to terms with the precise nature of her feelings for Clark. When she'd woken up and felt him lying behind her, realised who she was with and felt the evidence of his arousal, her first reaction had \*not\* been to run, to make her escape as quickly as she could. No; she had actually wanted to turn in his arms and reach for him. Her mind had filled with images of Clark kissing her, Clark running his hands over her body, her



touching Clark in the same way... she and Clark making love.

Making love with \*Clark\* - her best friend.

That was why she had sneaked out from under his arm and hurried to the bathroom; not because she'd wanted to get away from Clark, but because she'd wanted to stay with him. The realisation had scared her. He was her \*friend,\* and she needed his friendship. Clark as a lover... the thought might be appealing, but it was also scary. What if they'd given in to the impulse, the physical need, and had then been unable to face each other afterwards? What if they'd had sex and it had been terrible?

No, far better to ignore that physical need, and concentrate on their friendship. She needed him as a friend - the previous evening had shown her that. And she wasn't ready for a relationship right now, anyway. Not after Lex. She winced, cringed, as an image of Lex kissing her drifted into her mind. Ugh! How could she ever have.... But she had. Frequently.

That was why she was better off steering clear of relationships, she reasoned. Her taste in men was so lousy; she was far better off spending her free time with Clark. She was safe with him, she knew that. They knew where they were with each other: best friends, and something which was sort of... undefined. Undefined, but \*they\* knew where the boundaries were, what was acceptable between them and what was not. Clark was such a perfect gentleman, she knew he could be trusted not to cross that invisible line. And yet... she remembered her growing conviction that he was still in love with her. It took a very special kind of guy to offer the kind of comfort she'd needed while keeping his own feelings in check. But, she reflected in concern, that meant she would have to be careful not to hurt him, or appear to promise more than she was prepared to give.

She reached the Planet before Clark, and hurried to her desk to boot up her computer and check her mail before setting in motion her plan to track down Lex's first wife. But as she was scrolling through her mailbox, she heard Perry's gruff voice from somewhere over her left shoulder.

"Lois, you okay today?" her editor asked, sounding concerned.

She twisted to face him. "Sure, Perry, I'm fine. I was just a bit... tired, that's all." A little uncomfortable about uttering the small lie, she raised her left hand to brush her hair back from her face. Perry's shocked gasp took her by surprise.

"Lois, honey, what in the Sam Hill have you done to your hand?"

She had forgotten all about her hand, Lois realised in amazement. Clark had to have done a really good job of first aid, since the cuts didn't hurt a bit. She glanced down at the injuries, noticing that to anyone else it would look as if she had done serious damage to herself.

She gave Perry a wry smile. "It's a lot worse than it looks, Chief, believe me. And it's a long story - just take my word for it that it was an accident. I'm okay, really."

Another voice chimed in, much to Lois's annoyance. "Turning to

self-mutilation now, Lois? In my professional judgement something like that is a cry for help. Won't you let me help you?" Arianna Carlin finished in a saccharine voice.

Lois gritted her teeth. "It was *\*not\** a cry for help, Arianna. It was an accident. Clark will tell you - won't you, Clark?" she added as she spotted her partner striding across the newsroom floor towards them. She threw Clark a hard stare, hoping he would read her intentions and back her up.

"Tell Arianna what?" Clark enquired easily as he came to a halt beside Lois's desk.

"This," Lois pointed out, showing him her hands. "*\*Arianna\** thinks it was self-mutilation. Can you believe it?!"

She saw Clark raise an eyebrow in her direction, and it was obvious to her what he was thinking. Yes, she probably hadn't intended to injure herself, but what she'd done to her dress was certainly deliberate. But to her relief he supported her. "No, Arianna, it wasn't. Lois had an accident, but there's no real harm done."

Arianna Carlin still looked sceptical, but she took the hint and walked away. Perry, meanwhile, studied both members of his top writing team before addressing them sceptically. "You know, I'd love to know how cuts like those could happen *\*accidentally.\** But if you're both telling me I don't have anything to worry about, then I guess I don't have anything to worry about - do I?"

"No, you don't, Chief," Clark said firmly.

"No, nothing," Lois added.

"Well, okay then. I guess I'll stay out of it," the editor drawled. "Now, I want to know what progress you've made towards tracking down this Mrs A.C. Luthor who was mentioned yesterday! Our competitors are already making guesses - "

"And that's all they are, Perry, guesses," Lois pointed out. "Not one of them is anywhere near finding her."

"They've been trying to find you," Perry pointed out. "I've had people screening your calls since yesterday afternoon. Sleazy tabloid reporters, wanting to know how you felt knowing Luthor had been married before."

Clark frowned, his gaze instantly focusing on Lois to see how she took this piece of news. But, to his relief, it didn't seem to bother her.

"Yeah, they were probably ringing my apartment too," she said with a shrug. "There was a message on my answerphone when I got home yesterday, and I unplugged the phone after that." She grinned suddenly, then added, "You can tell them if they want to know how I feel, they can read about it in the Daily Planet - after Clark and I have found the ex-Mrs Luthor!"

Perry's face creased into a smile. "You bet I'll do that! Lois, it's great to see you looking your old self again. Guess talking to

Arianna yesterday must have helped you after all."

Lois threw Clark a long-suffering glance before replying. "Chief, it had nothing to do with Arianna Carlin. Just where did you get her from, anyway? There's something not quite... \*right\* about her. Some of the things she was asking me..." Lois trailed off, since Perry didn't appear to be listening any more and Clark had suddenly excused himself. "Oh, that's right, just ignore me," Lois muttered. Just where had Clark taken himself off to, anyway? Didn't he realise they had work to do?

Well, she would just have to get on with it on her own. That didn't worry her too greatly; now that she had finally put her reactions to the fiasco of her engagement into words, she realised that one of the things she needed to do, for her own satisfaction, was to prove herself again as an investigative reporter. Without realising it, she had been suffering from a crisis of confidence as a result of not having seen through Lex's facade. She needed a couple of good exclusives to get herself back on top, to prove to herself that she was still as good as she always had been.

She began to scribble on her notepad. Task: find out just who was Lex Luthor's first wife. < Okay... how do I do that? > Check official registers of marriages, she ticked off in her mind. But, she reasoned, the other papers would have already done that, and from her scan of their reports they had come up with precisely nothing. Lex might not even have been married in this country, let alone this state, Lois rationalised. He could have been married anywhere in the world.

Who would know? Mrs Cox, probably. She was in prison, awaiting trial. Lois knew that she could probably pull some strings and get to see her ex-fiance's former personal assistant. But what motive would Mrs Cox have for helping the Daily Planet? The two women hadn't got on at all. In fact, Lois was pretty sure that Mrs Cox had actively disliked her.

Nigel might have known, as would Asabi. But neither man had been seen since the day of the wedding; they had somehow managed to escape in the confusion. Of course Lex's solicitor would know. Sheldon Bender. That was him, Lois remembered. He had been at the will-reading, of course; she had noticed from the other papers' coverage that he had refused to answer any questions afterwards, however. Which, she supposed, was just as well from their point of view. After she'd become upset at realising that Lex had been married before, Clark had hustled her out of the room before the formal reading had ended. If Bender \*had\* given away any relevant information afterwards, Perry would have had their hides.

So... Sheldon Bender was as good a place as any to start, she thought as she picked up her telephone and dialled. It didn't take her long to get past Bender's secretary, who was not proof against the patented Lane form of attack. Bender himself didn't seem particularly pleased to be speaking to his late client's almost-wife, but within a very few minutes Lois had him apologising profusely to her for his neglect of her.

"And why was I not formally invited to the will-reading yesterday?" Lois demanded, playing the part of the wounded fiancée to the hilt.

"Oh... well, you see, Ms Lane, you weren't included in the will - Mr Luthor had in fact made an appointment to change his will, but the appointment wasn't until after the two of you were to return from your honeymoon.... I know, you have every right to be upset that you were omitted from consideration, but legally... legally you have no right to any part of the estate."

"Legally, no, but \*morally\*..." Lois sighed heavily. "Sheldon... I may call you Sheldon, mayn't I? Sheldon, it's all been such a shock to me. First, the police bursting in like that just as I was about to say 'I do,' then my poor Lex jumping from the balcony right in front of me. And then yesterday... such a shock! I discovered that Lex - my Lex - had been married before. And he never told me!"

"Well, yes, I can see it would have been a shock," the lawyer replied. "It was to me too - I mean, I had the will, but Mr Luthor had insisted that it be kept as a sealed document except in the event that it should be required. My office is actually trying to locate the former Mrs Luthor as we speak."

"Have you found her?" Lois deliberately made her voice sound pathetic, grateful for the fact that this conversation was taking place over the telephone. Had she gone to Bender's office, there was no way she would have been able to keep up the facade of a grieving widow without giving herself away through visual cues.

"Not yet - but we will," Bender assured her.

"And... when you do...?" Lois murmured plaintively. "You will tell me, won't you? I really would like to meet my almost-predecessor."

"Well..." Bender tried to evade the issue. "There is the question of client confidentiality, you know, Ms Lane."

"Client confidentiality," Lois purred smoothly. "That's an interesting point, Sheldon. You believe in client confidentiality, do you?"

"Ummm - of course!" Bender replied, sounding unsure.

"Well, here's a question which interests me," Lois returned crisply. "Just where does client confidentiality end and your duty to uphold the law begin?"

There was a pause, before Bender ventured cautiously, "I'm not sure I understand what you're talking about, Ms Lane."

"No?" Lois enquired sweetly. "Well, try this. Everyone in Metropolis now knows that Lex Luthor's business activities were not always on the right side of the law. You were his principal lawyer. Now, I work for the Daily Planet, which has been very forthright in telling the public the truth about the man who claimed to be a great philanthropist. So far, though, I don't believe my colleagues have directed any of their enquiries in your direction.... Do you get my drift, Sheldon?" she finished sardonically.

This time there was a longer pause, before Bender said in an unctuous tone, "Please do give me a number where I can reach you, and you will

have that information as soon as my office gets it."

Lois grinned as she replaced the receiver. She hadn't lost her touch at all.

"Hey, Lois! You're looking very pleased with yourself!"

She swung around and saw Jimmy heading towards her. Raising an eyebrow at him, she decided to have a little fun with him. "Well, Jimmy, when you're at the top of your profession, it's all right to pat yourself on the back every now and then for a job well done." She paused deliberately, then added, "Course, it helps to be the best to begin with."

"Oh yeah, and we all know you're the best, Lois," Jimmy teased her. His expression grew serious then. "You know, I haven't had a chance to say this to you yet, but it's really great to be back at the Planet, with you, and CK, and Perry and everyone. I really thought we'd never see the place open up again - but here we all are, and the paper's even better than ever."

"Yeah," Lois agreed softly. "I just wish I'd been there to help you and Clark and the others put together all the evidence on the bombing. You did a great job."

Jimmy shrugged awkwardly. "You were kinda otherwise engaged... um, I mean, occupied, at the time."

"You were right the first time," Lois told him with a grimace. "I guess I was a little crazy for a while. But all that's over now, and I'm very glad to be back here too. You know, I was surprised the Chief gave me a second chance, since I was working for LNN when you were all saving the Planet."

"Are you joking, Lois?" Jimmy demanded incredulously. "This wouldn't be the Planet without Lois Lane. And Clark Kent now, too - and I bet CK wouldn't have stayed here if you hadn't come back."

Lois smiled wryly. "I guess some of you know far more about loyalty than I did," she murmured. Then, glancing around, she asked, "Jimmy, have you any idea where Clark went?"

Jimmy shrugged again. "I saw him heading for the stairs about... oh, twenty minutes ago. But he didn't say where he was headed."

"Oh, never mind..." Lois began, but then her attention was distracted by the TV screens. "What's going on?"

Superman's image filled the banks of screens; it seemed he was assisting at the scene of a disaster, and the TV cameras had just arrived to cover the incident. Lois grimaced: two express trains had collided at high speed, and Superman was attempting to put out the fires which had started, as well as telling rescue workers where to find injured survivors.

"I better get over there," Jimmy gabbled excitedly; Lois translated that as meaning that Jimmy had every intention of getting to the accident site before Perry could stop him. He was junior enough to find the thought of covering an incident like this exciting; once he'd covered a few he would understand that the human tragedy

involved in such disasters was very difficult to cope with. Unlike the emergency services employees, reporters were rarely offered counselling or special training to help them cope with covering traumatic events.

And there was Superman... who counselled him? Unlike many people who covered Superman activities for the media, Lois had never made the mistake of thinking that the Man of Steel had no heart. She had seen evidence of his capacity for emotion on a number of occasions; she knew he cared about the people he helped on a daily basis. She had believed he cared about her....

She brushed that thought away in annoyance. She was *\*over\** that! Superman meant nothing to her, except as someone who had the ability to do amazing things, and who used his special abilities to help others.

But.... She studied the screen again, watching the blue-suited Super-hero as he darted around, bringing out injured victims and lifting bits of what had once been a railway carriage so that the emergency services could gain access. This man wasn't as invulnerable as she, and everyone else, had believed.

What Clark had told her the previous evening, about Lex Luthor's attempt to kill Superman, had shocked her. But the real implication of that revelation was only now sinking in. Superman, the all-powerful Man of Steel, was not invincible after all. He could be hurt, even killed, by a piece of rock.

Who else knew about this? she wondered, appalled. Where had Luthor obtained the Kryptonite he'd used to make the cage? And what had happened to that cage? She needed to ask Clark. Was there any more Kryptonite out there somewhere? And... just how badly had Superman been hurt on the day of her wedding? He'd had no powers, Clark had said.

How had he been trapped by Luthor in the first place?

She shook her head, turning her attention back to the television screens. She would probably never find the answer to her questions, but there was one thing she was sure about. Now that she knew Kryptonite was real, and that it really did have the capacity to harm Superman, she would do her very best to ensure that the information did not become public knowledge. That was one Superman story which would not end up in the Daily Planet. Sighing, she hoped that the accident wasn't as serious as the news announcer, who was appearing to enjoy sensationalising the story, was making out, and returned to her desk.

Her telephone rang shortly afterwards, and she answered it absently. The female voice at the other end was slightly husky and accented, and sounded vaguely familiar to Lois.

"Yes, this is Lois Lane," she replied crisply. "Who am I speaking to?"

"I believe you've been trying to find me, Ms Lane," the voice replied. English, Lois thought - is that an English accent?

"Have I?" she queried. "It might help if you told me who you are."

"Perhaps we should meet," the woman answered. "Let me see... how about somewhere I'm sure we're both familiar with - the penthouse office at LexCorp, perhaps?"

Lois's intuition kicked in, suggesting that it knew the identity of her caller. But she stalled a little first. "LexCorp? And how would either of us get in there? The whole company is in the hands of administrators pending the final disposition of Lex Luthor's assets."

"Oh, I can go anywhere on Luthor property I wish," the woman purred smoothly. "But then, that's because I can lay claim to a name you didn't quite get the right to use. That's Luthor, by the way. I am Mrs A.C. Luthor."

< I knew it!> Lois screamed silently, triumphantly. But she refused to allow her exultation to show. "And how do I know that's who you are? You could be anyone at all."

"I could," her caller agreed. "But who other than Lex's ex-wife, and perhaps his ex-fiancee, would know what he wanted to name his first son?"

Lois drew a sharp breath. "Go on."

The woman laughed. "Typically, Lex wanted his son to have a name which would remind everyone of who the boy's father was. Alexander, for preference, of course - "

"Alexander the Great," Lois finished. "Whose sword Lex owned."

"I see you do know who I am," the first Mrs Luthor murmured. "I'll expect you in fifteen minutes."

As Lois hung up, she briefly considered whether she should leave a note for Clark. She didn't know where he was, which counted against him; he had left without telling her he was going, or when he would be back. This behaviour surprised and hurt her, after he'd been so understanding and caring the previous evening. That he would disappear without explanation now seemed to suggest a lack of interest in them as a team.

But.... She dismissed that thought as suddenly as it came. Whatever Clark's reason for being absent now, there was no doubt in her mind that she mattered to him. No-one could be there for her in the way Clark had been last night if they didn't care.

Grabbing her notepad, she scribbled, 'Gone to meet Mrs L at L-Corp', ripped the sheet off her pad, and threw the page on Clark's desk as she exited the office. She didn't look back, and therefore missed seeing the flimsy sheet float onto the floor, landing underneath Clark's chair.

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Clark hated train crashes, he decided as he flew back to the Planet newsroom. They wreaked even more havoc, caused even more human misery than car or plane crashes. At least both cars and aeroplanes had

seatbelts, although in the former case not everyone used them. But when seatbelts were used, they helped to minimise injury and in many cases saved lives.

Trains were different. Frail, vulnerable humans were packed loosely inside them with no protection at all against the sharp and very hard objects which were also contained within the carriages - seats, tables, luggage racks and so on - to say nothing of the components of the carriages and windows themselves. The injuries which resulted from a train crash were always horrific, and that was without taking into account the consequences of fire.

At least this one hadn't been as bad as it could have been, he reflected. Thanks to hearing the emergency broadcast which had relayed the call for the fire service, he had managed to get to the crash site early enough to be able to put out the fires before they'd taken serious hold. Once that had been taken care of, he'd been able to take out the non-walking wounded who could be moved quickly enough, then make the ruined carriages accessible so that the emergency workers could get at those more seriously injured who couldn't be moved.

An hour and a half later - though it had seemed far longer - he had been able to make his excuses and leave. The paramedics and other rescue services could manage on their own by then, and anyway he wanted to get back to the Planet and Lois.

Walking into the bullpen as Clark a few minutes later, he glanced around in surprise. Where was Lois? She didn't seem to be around anywhere... and, he realised, her jacket and bag were gone. He hurried over to her desk, but there was no clue to her location anywhere.

He was about to return to his own desk when Lois's phone rang. Automatically, he answered it. "Lois Lane's desk - Clark Kent speaking."

"Get me Lane," a rough masculine voice demanded.

"I'm sorry, but she's not here right now," Clark replied evenly, ignoring the caller's rudeness. "This is her partner. Can I help?"

The man hesitated, then seemingly decided that Clark would have to do. "I guess so. Look, tell Lane that I found the ex-wife. They got married in England - that's why no-one knew anything about it. Her name's Arianna - Arianna Carlin."

Arianna Carlin! Clark managed to find the words to assure the caller that he would pass the message on, but as he replaced the receiver he felt rooted to the spot. A.C. Luthor was actually Arianna Carlin - the woman Perry had hired as a psychiatrist! What a coincidence, he thought; then he dismissed that idea. There was no way it could be a coincidence. After Lex Luthor dies, his ex-wife turns up at the newspaper Luthor bought and then destroyed, and makes it her business to get Lois Lane - Luthor's almost-second wife - as a patient... that was no coincidence. Clark was sure of it.

"Perry?" he called authoritatively, heading swiftly towards the editor's office. "There's something I have to tell you...."



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Lois breezed past the security guard at the LexCorp entrance as if she had every right to enter the building; so much so that it took the guard a couple of seconds to react to her intrusion. He called to her, demanding that she come back, but by that time she had summoned the elevator and was on her way up to the penthouse floor.

Exiting the elevator, Lois glanced around her cautiously, half-wishing for the first time that she had waited for Clark. She wasn't *\*afraid\** exactly, she told herself, but she had come to an office she'd thought never to see again, to meet a woman she didn't know, the ex-wife of a man who, to Lois's relief, had departed this life.

"Lois? So good of you to come!" a voice called, and Lois swung around in the direction of Lex's enormous desk. That desk had suited Lex, she thought suddenly, inconsequentially. It gave off an aura of power, complete control, which was something Lex had exuded. The oversized chair simply added to that impression.

But the voice was very familiar, far more so than it had been over the phone. Lois frowned. Arianna Carlin? What was Perry's tame psychiatrist doing here?

As Lois watched, the chair swung around to reveal Arianna, a smile on her face which didn't seem to reach her eyes. "Have you worked it out yet, Lois?"

"Mrs A.C. Luthor - Arianna Carlin Luthor," Lois ground out. "Yes, I've figured it out. Oh, you must really have enjoyed making me tell you how I felt about my engagement and Lex's death!" she threw sarcastically at the other woman.

Arianna shook her head slowly. "Not at all, Lois. In fact, I hated every second of it. It was obvious to me that you didn't care about Lex at all. You were just using him. *\*I\** loved him, more than I've ever loved anyone else. You... you didn't deserve him."

Although she knew it was probably unwise, Lois flung back, "He can't have loved you, Arianna - he divorced you. And he never even told me he'd been married."

"That's not important now," Arianna brushed Lois's barb aside. "What is important is that now I'm going to make sure Lex is revenged."

"Oh yeah?" As she spoke, Lois was subtly edging herself towards the door, hoping to make a run for it. It was now clear that Arianna Carlin was, at the very least, mentally unstable. < *\*Why\** didn't I wait for Clark? > she asked herself again, grimacing inwardly as she calculated the remaining distance to the door. "And just how are you going to do that?"

"How? By killing Superman and making sure that you take the blame for his death, Lois," Arianna informed her, a sardonic smile hovering around her mouth. "It won't be difficult. There are plenty of witnesses who'll say that you haven't been yourself since your

wedding day. You saw your fiance jump to his death in front of you. Even your boss thinks you came close to a nervous breakdown. Your partner made sure you talked to me the other day. And as your doctor, I'll be able to testify that you were very disturbed when I interviewed you. And as for the self-mutilation...." Arianna paused, smiling broadly suddenly. "Oh, Lois, you played right into my hands by injuring your hands like that."

Suddenly she produced a gun and trained it steadily on Lois. "And then there's Superman. You blame him for Lex's death. He could have saved Lex, but he didn't. I have witnesses who say they saw you tell Superman you didn't need him, and walk away as if you were angry with him. You told \*me\* you hated him for not saving Lex...."

"I did \*not\*!" Lois protested suddenly, furiously, but Arianna only laughed.

"It will be my word against yours, Lois, and I am a psychiatrist. I have been treating you, and my diagnosis will be that you're suffering from a severe case of depression and delayed shock. In that state, you could be capable of \*anything\*...."

Lois stared at the psychiatrist in horror as she realised the nature of the trap she had walked into. Trying to buy herself some additional time, she adjusted her features and stared coolly at Arianna. "You can't kill Superman - he's invulnerable. Nothing can kill him."

But Arianna smiled again, this time triumphantly. "Nothing? Haven't you heard of a little thing called Kryptonite? Lex had some, and a friend of his was kind enough to pass some on to me." She moved forward swiftly, towards Lois, and gestured with the gun. "Get over to the couch."

"No." Lois stood her ground, determined not to be part of this plan. If she refused to co-operate, what could Carlin do? If she killed Lois, she couldn't then claim Lois had killed Superman.

She made a sudden dash for the door, but as she reached it she realised that Arianna had activated the automatic lock. She was trapped. And Arianna was advancing on her, gun in one hand and... something else she couldn't see in the other.

Lois prepared to defend herself, drawing on her strength to launch a Tai Kwon Do kick at her captor. But as she kept her eye on Arianna's gun, she completely missed the hypodermic in Carlin's left hand. The needle had penetrated her upper arm before she realised what it was.

As Lois slumped towards the floor, Arianna Carlin caught her and dragged her towards the large leather couch, draping her unresisting body along its hard seat.

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"Judas Priest! Are you telling me that Arianna Carlin is Luthor's ex-wife?" Perry exclaimed, appalled.

"That's what I've just been told, Chief," Clark replied, his brow furrowed.

"But... but I brought that woman into the Planet in good faith - I thought she was going to help people here get over the trauma...." Perry trailed off, heaving a huge sigh. "And all the time she.... She wanted to get to Lois, didn't she?"

"That's my guess, Chief," Clark answered with a grimace. "And right now I don't know where Lois is. Where's Arianna?"

Perry looked momentarily helpless. "I think she's in the conference room - "

"No, she's not," Clark interrupted. He had used his X-ray vision to check, but he had no intention of telling Perry that. "I... um, I checked on my way in here."

"Okay, well, we can get Lois on her beeper. And I'll call the police department to tell them we think that woman might be after Lois."

Clark paused on his way out of Perry's office. "I'm not sure that'd do much good right now, Chief. It's not as if Arianna's actually committed any offence."

He heard his own phone start to ring, so he excused himself and hurried over to pick it up.

"Clark Kent," he announced himself.

"Oh, Clark, I'm so glad I've got you," a concerned-sounding female voice told him. "It's Arianna Carlin here - I'm very worried about Lois."

Clark's eyebrows shot up, and he gestured furiously at Perry. "Arianna - what is it? What's happened?"

"Well, Lois called me - she's at LexCorp, in the penthouse. And when I came over here, she started acting in a very disturbed manner. She's threatening to kill herself unless she can speak to Superman. Clark, are you able to contact him?"

Wondering just what the woman was up to, and suspecting a trap for his alter ego, Clark pushed his fears aside and replied in a concerned tone, "I'll do what I can, Arianna. Look after her, please."

He hung up quickly and, pausing only to tell Perry to call the police and send them over to LexCorp, he ran out of the newsroom. Flying towards LexCorp seconds later, he debated with himself the merits of going in as Clark or as Superman. Arianna obviously wanted Superman for some reason, so would going in as the Man of Steel be playing into her hands? He could help Lois as Clark too - but what if the situation called for Super-powers and he was unable to use his abilities surreptitiously?

He decided to X-ray the penthouse first. If it was only Arianna, if she didn't have any back-up, then he should be able to handle the situation as Clark.

But when he scanned the office suite, what he saw caused a cold hand

to grip itself around his heart. Lois was lying slumped on the sofa, not moving; her arms hung limply over the edge of the seat. She was either unconscious or... dead.

No...! He screamed silently as his eyes took in the sight of the woman he loved as she lay unmoving in the room beneath him. She couldn't be dead... he couldn't lose her. Not now! Not after all they'd been through in the past few months; not after... last night, when he had held her in his arms while she'd cried, comforted her while she'd talked out the horrors of her experiences, cuddled her next to him while she'd slept. If she was dead now....

Less than a second later, Superman burst through the large picture window. His gaze immediately went to Lois, and he zoomed in with his Super-vision, looking for a pulse; simultaneously he activated his Super-hearing, hoping to detect a heartbeat. To his immense relief, he found both.

Spinning around then to face Arianna Carlin, he glared at her. "Dr Carlin - what have you done to Lois?" he demanded sternly.

To Clark's surprise, she seemed not at all disconcerted to be faced with an angry Super-hero; but then, she had requested Superman's presence, so he shouldn't be surprised if she seemed to have something up her sleeve. He watched her warily; he'd already seen that she had a gun held behind her back. Did these people forget his abilities?

But she smiled, in a secretive manner which continued to arouse Clark's suspicions. "Superman. Thank you for coming." She walked towards him, swaying her hips as she did so. "Don't worry about Lois, she's quite all right. I had to tranquillise her, unfortunately. She was becoming very agitated."

"Dr Carlin, I think I should tell you that your secret's out," Clark stated firmly, deciding that he was no longer prepared to play along. "We know you're Luthor's ex-wife. So I ask you again: what have you done to Lois?"

"Oh, Superman. You are very anxious for the well-being of a woman who rejected you in order to marry someone else, aren't you?" Carlin drawled maliciously.

"You know nothing about that," Clark growled. "Now tell me what you injected Lois with." He scanned the room at Super-speed... yes, there was a hypodermic. He could take it with Lois to the hospital if need be.... He began to calculate the safest means of getting Lois out of there, deciding that he needed to get the gun away from Arianna first. He didn't want to risk her shooting Lois before he could get safely away.

"Well, whether I do or not, it hardly matters, Superman," Arianna replied with an amused smile. "You're not going to be around to care." She drew her arm out from behind her back, pointing the gun at him. "You let Lex die - you're going to die in return."

Clark couldn't believe it; he didn't move, simply stared at her. "Do you people never learn?" he asked incredulously, a disbelieving smile hovering about his lips. "Bullets can't hurt me...."

The end of his sentence was lost in the sound of the gunfire. He saw the bullet emerge and didn't flinch, expecting it to bounce off him. Too late, he noticed its green hue... and then it struck him in the shoulder, penetrating his body. The biting, hot pain was incredible; he clutched at his shoulder as he stared at Arianna in disbelief.

Emitting an anguished cry, he fell backwards, still barely able to believe what had happened.

With a smile of satisfaction, Arianna Carlin moved swiftly towards Lois, pushing the gun into the unconscious woman's hand before she turned and quickly exited the room.

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Stupid, stupid, \*stupid\*! Clark thought as he lay writhing in agony on the floor. He had \*known\* she was up to something; he had even told himself he would be ill-advised to come as Superman. He should have come as Clark Kent, telling Carlin that he hadn't been able to find Superman. He had been too impetuous, as usual. And now he had a Kryptonite bullet inside him. The radiation emerging from the thing was bad enough, but it was \*inside\* him, poisoning his blood. Unless he could get it out, and away from him, very quickly, he would be dead within half an hour.

But how could he get it out? He couldn't even touch the bullet. One attempt had been enough to make him scream as the evil substance had burned his fingers. And Lois was unconscious: he had no idea what she had been injected with to put her to sleep, but she certainly didn't look as if she was about to come round any time soon. He could see Arianna's plot now: his assailant had been wearing gloves, but the gun was now in Lois's hand. Once they were discovered - and Clark was very sure that their discovery would have been timed to coincide, somehow, with Lois's awakening from her drugged sleep - it would look as if Lois had shot and killed Superman. She would deny it, of course, but the gun would be found in her hand. And of course, Arianna Carlin, a qualified psychiatrist, would testify that Lois had been depressed and in a very unstable mental state recently. Clark remembered suddenly Arianna's interest in the scratches on Lois's hands, and he knew that those would also be used as evidence of Lois's mental state. Arianna would even use Perry to back her up in her allegations about Lois's state of health, he realised, remembering the conversation that morning. Dr Carlin seemed to have done a good job of convincing their editor that Lois was on the verge of some kind of a breakdown.

He couldn't let her be found guilty of his murder, and committed to some mental hospital! Whatever about himself - and he wasn't ready to die yet if he could help it - he couldn't allow that to happen to Lois. There had to be \*something\* he could do!

But he was still in agony, and time was running out. He tried to force himself to concentrate - there had to be something.

He needed Lois, that was the problem. How could he wake her up?

He tried calling her name, but was unsurprised when that yielded no results. After all, she had slept through his angry exchange with Carlin, and his shouts of pain when he'd been shot. His eyes searched

the room frantically, looking for a solution.

The fishtank. There was a large fishtank on a table behind the couch where Lois lay. If he could just drag up enough strength to use his heat vision... he only needed a little dart, just enough to burn one tiny hole....

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There was water falling on her face. It was getting in her eyes, running down her nose. Lois blinked - was she out in the rain? No, she was lying down. Someone must be dribbling water on her....

No, she remembered. She was in Lex Luthor's office, and Arianna Carlin had been there. But... there was something else; she struggled to remember. Her limbs felt so heavy, though, and her brain felt fogged. There was something in her hand - curiously, she looked down and to her shock saw that she was holding a gun. As if it was burning her hand, she dropped it.

Someone was calling her name; she swung her head around and saw Superman, lying on the floor with his face contorted in agony. Horrified, she struggled to push aside the fog in her brain and tried to concentrate, dragging herself to her feet. One foot, then the other... yes, she could walk without falling over.

"Superman? What... what happened?" she cried as she hurried to his side, and saw the blood emerging from the small hole in his shoulder. She winced, at once remembering Arianna Carlin's reference to Kryptonite. "Superman...? I'll call an ambulance!"

His hand reached out weakly towards her, his expression pleading. "No... too long. It has to come out now."

She faltered. Was he asking her to remove the bullet? It seemed so. Lois had never exactly been squeamish, but the thought of digging a bullet out of an injured man - a \*conscious\* injured man, at that - scared her witless. What if she only managed to drive it in further? What if she caused more internal damage than the bullet had already done?

She crouched beside him, forcing herself to look at his wound. "I don't know if I can do this," she protested, already accepting that she would have to. His hand curled around hers and his gaze met hers, his brown eyes, filled with pain, pleading silently with her.

Lois inhaled deeply as she gathered her courage, then she stood and quickly looked around for something to use as a lever. On Lex's desk she spotted a dagger-shaped letter-opener, and she grabbed it. No time to worry about the lack of sterilisation, she thought as she crouched again by Superman's side. Her hand shaking, she placed the point of the letter-opener at the opening of his wound. She paused, saying a silent prayer that she would be successful. As she began to ease the dagger inside, his blood pooling around the blade as she did so, she noticed Superman turn his head away and close his eyes; she saw him flinch and felt his body contort as the object dug deeper into his torn flesh.

She found the bullet, and eased the letter-opener under it; a moment later she was pushing it out. Once enough of the lethal object was

above the surface, she grabbed at it, pulling it completely free of Superman's body. His eyes were open again, and she saw him give her a look of relief and grateful thanks.

"Please - get that away from me," he gasped, and she quickly got to her feet and backed away as she realised that her proximity was still causing him pain. As she did so, her jaw dropped in disbelief as she saw the bullet-wound close itself as if by magic. At the same time, he dragged himself to his feet, backing away to put even greater distance between himself and the Kryptonite.

"Superman... you're okay?" she asked him, still concerned.

"I'll be fine, Lois, but I can't stay around while that thing's here. And I have to catch Arianna... so please excuse me," he told her quickly, turning about and flying awkwardly out of the large picture window.

Shaking suddenly from delayed shock, Lois collapsed again onto the couch hardly able to believe what she had just done. She had actually dug a bullet out of Superman - if she didn't still have the blood-stained livid green article in her hand, she would find it hard to believe.

"Clark was right when he said that stuff could kill Superman," she whispered, horrified. She just hoped that Arianna Carlin didn't have any more of the stuff. That, she realised suddenly, still left her with the problem of what to do about \*this\* piece of the lethal meteorite. It was lethal to Superman; therefore she couldn't leave it just anywhere. She could drop it in the middle of the Hobbs River, maybe? But then, she considered, she had no idea of how strong its range might be. Could it affect Superman if he flew overhead? And what if some fishing boat or dredger was to dig it up again?

What else could she do with it? The middle of the Atlantic? But there was still the problem of whether it would affect Superman should he fly overhead. The same would apply if she tried burying it in the ground.

Was there \*anywhere\* it would be safe? She frowned suddenly. Trask had had Kryptonite in Smallville - the chunk which had been found on Wayne Irig's farm. She thought that piece had ended up back at Clark's parents' farm, when Trask had gone completely insane and convinced himself that somehow Clark would be vulnerable to it. What had happened to it afterwards? Lois racked her brain, but realised she didn't actually know. The aftermath of that fight by the Kents' pond was a bit of a blur. She had been so relieved that Clark was alive at the end of it that she hadn't really noticed what was going on around them. Somehow Trask's body had been dragged out of the pond, the Kents and Wayne Irig had been set free, and Lois and Clark had ended up in the kitchen, mugs of hot coffee in their hands and blankets around their shoulders, Lois having become wet from Clark's soaking clothing.

So... just what had happened to that Kryptonite?

Clark would know, she realised. She could call Clark, and ask him about the safest way of disposing of it. She hurried to the phone on Luthor's desk, not even thinking about the ownership of the office, and dialled Clark's desk phone.

"You have reached the desk of Clark Kent. I'm not here right now...."

She grimaced and hung up. She needed to get out of here and find out what had happened to Arianna Carlin; she could catch up with Clark at the office. The Kryptonite could stay in her handbag for now, and she'd just have to warn Superman to keep his distance if she saw him.

Though he probably would anyway, she reasoned; he'd have to know it was possible she still had the bullet. And anyway, after the hurt and embarrassment of their last private meeting, he wasn't likely to be seeking her out any time soon.

She sneaked out of the LexCorp building and hailed a taxi to take her back to the Planet.

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Landing silently on his balcony, Clark walked swiftly into his living-room, spinning out of his Suit and changing back into work clothes on the way. He grimaced at the bullet-hole in his Super-suit, hoping that his mother would be able to find a way to repair it. He really didn't want to have to ask her to make yet another new outfit.

It had been relatively easy capturing Arianna Carlin in the end. She hadn't expected Superman to survive, and she had simply taken a taxi from LexCorp; he had spotted her very quickly and had intercepted the police on their way to Lex Luthor's former headquarters. A brief summary from Superman of what Dr Carlin had tried to do - though he'd held back the bit about shooting him, since he didn't want the existence of Kryptonite to become common knowledge - and the police had cheerfully taken the psychiatrist off for questioning.

Clark had wanted to go back to ensure that Lois was all right, but since he'd left the Kryptonite with her, he knew he couldn't. Instead, he'd headed home to get rid of the damaged Suit. Once he'd hidden it, he would head back to the Planet.

But then his phone shrilled. He hesitated; he really needed to get back to work, among other things to check whether Lois had returned safely. He wouldn't put it past her to... well, he didn't know. But he did know that if there was trouble anywhere, she was capable of finding it.

Grimacing at the phone, he hurried across and grabbed it. To his surprise, it was the object of his thoughts - Lois. Thinking rapidly to remember what Clark was supposed to know, as opposed to Superman, he spoke quickly.

"Lois - where've you been? I got back to the Planet to find you gone, and then I found out that Arianna Carlin - "

"Is Lex's ex-wife. Yes, I know, Clark," she interrupted him, her voice sounding agitated. "I left you a note to say where I'd gone - it was on your desk! Look, that's all okay now - at least I hope it is, Superman went after her, but I hope he was strong enough... well, never mind that. Clark, I'm at the Planet - I thought you'd be here



but you're not. I need your advice."

She'd left a note? He hadn't seen that. "About what? Slow down, Lois!" he asked her.

Her voice level dropped, so that he almost had to use his Super-hearing to follow what she was saying. "I have some Kryptonite - Superman was shot and I had to remove the bullet - but I'd not sure what I should do with it. What did you do with the stuff Trask had?"

The Kryptonite! Of course, he hadn't given Lois any instructions about it. It was just as well he hadn't gone straight back to the Planet after handing Dr Carlin over to the police, he realised; he'd have walked straight into Lois who obviously still had the deadly item.

Trying to sound as if he was racking his brain for an idea, he replied carefully, "Lead is the only substance which is impervious to Superman's powers. If you could seal the Kryptonite up in lead somehow, that ought to do. Get it completely enclosed and you could probably give it to Superman to destroy - or if you like you can give it to me." < As long as you wrap it in lead first> he thought grimly.

"Lead? You're sure, Clark? Okay," she accepted. "I'll see you later - we need to write up this Carlin story."

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Lois slammed down the phone and hurried down to the underground car park; retrieving her Jeep, she drove to the outskirts of town and pulled up at a builder's yard. A few minutes later, she emerged triumphantly clutching a thin sheet of lead. Throwing it in the back of the Jeep, she then drove to a hardware store, where she purchased a soldering iron.

Back at her apartment, she sat cross-legged on the floor and carefully bent the lead so that it was wrapped securely and thickly around the small bullet. She finished off the packaging by soldering every edge and join which her naked eye could see, ending up with a bulky, uneven but very secure package.

Placing it inside the hidden cabinet where she kept her Kerth awards, she locked the catch before leaving the apartment.

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"Lois, honey, I want to apologise to you," Perry said as soon as she stepped inside his office in response to his request. "I believed that Carlin woman when she tried to tell me you were on the edge of a breakdown, and she had me convinced this morning that you'd tried to harm yourself."

Lois shrugged. "I guess she was pretty convincing - and anyway, I haven't been myself lately. I know I tried to pretend I was okay, but I was bottling everything up inside - including the fact that I'd lost confidence in my own judgement, because I had no idea Lex was a crook." She threw her boss a wry smile. "It took Clark to convince me

that I needed to talk about things, and accept that I need time to get over it."

"Clark's one of the good guys," Perry said softly. "That's one case where I was definitely right about someone - unlike this time."

Lois smiled softly, remembering the previous evening... and that morning. "Yeah, Clark's definitely one of a kind. Though I wonder where the heck he got to while I was facing the mad Dr Carlin all on my own!"

Perry looked surprised. "He ran out of here immediately after telling me Carlin was Luthor's ex and yelling at me to call the cops. Didn't he meet you over at LexCorp?"

Lois shook her head, puzzled. "I never saw him. And he wasn't here when I got back first - but he *\*was\** at his apartment! Weird... I'll have to ask him where he got to. He was here when I came back the second time."

"Yeah, and he had the story of Carlin's arrest written up within half an hour of getting back," Perry replied, shaking his head slowly. "Just how that boy manages to work so fast sometimes is beyond me - but as long as he can keep it up I ain't going to wonder where he gets to at times."

"I guess not, Chief," Lois replied, but her demeanour was thoughtful as she left the editor's office.

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On her own later that evening, Lois flicked through the TV channels watching the coverage of Arianna Carlin's arrest and her exposure as Luthor's ex-wife. The Daily Planet was credited with the information leading to her arrest, and some digging which Lois and Clark had done later that afternoon had led to the conclusion that, even though her marriage to Luthor had been dissolved several years previously, she had been in on at least some of his illegal transactions. Dr Carlin would be spending several years in prison, Lois thought with a sense of satisfaction.

A noise outside her window attracted her attention; a sound she'd thought herself unlikely to hear ever again. Surprised, she crossed the room and looked out. It *\*was\** Superman; hesitantly, Lois opened the casement window to allow him entry. This was one visitor she hadn't expected to be entertaining in her apartment again, she thought, taken aback.

"Lois, I wanted to be sure you were okay after what happened today," Superman began, his expression seeming to Lois to be a little strained. She wondered whether he was still suffering from the after-effects of exposure to Kryptonite, and felt a moment's concern about whether the lead wrapping was actually sufficient protection from the green bullet.

She raised her gaze to his, replying tentatively, "I'm fine, Superman - but what about you? She could have killed you, couldn't she?" Her expression was anxious, she knew; not at all the demeanour she would have intended to adopt in a private discussion with Superman, if

she'd been asked about such an eventuality before today. But then, it had been a traumatic day in a number of ways.

"Oh, I'm fully recovered, I assure you," he told her, smiling to reassure her of the truth of his words. "Lois, I wanted to thank you for what you did today," he added, his expression more serious. "You saved my life. And I know it can't have been easy for you."

Embarrassed, Lois shrugged. "Superman, I only did what anyone would have done...."

"Not anyone, Lois - you did it," he reminded her.

They were standing several feet apart, both holding their bodies tensely, Lois realised. It seemed so strange, so sad that they were awkward in each other's company, and she found herself wishing fervently that she'd never told Superman she loved him.

But he was speaking again, and now she listened to his words in growing incredulity. "Lois, there's another reason I'm grateful to you. After the things I said to you the last time I was here, I couldn't have blamed you if - "

She glared at him, furious suddenly. "If what, Superman? If I'd left you to die? Do you really think I'm that vengeful? That I hate you so much I'd prefer to see you dead? I hope you'd realise that whatever my own feelings towards you, I wouldn't want to deprive Metropolis of you. The city *\*needs\** you." She broke off abruptly; she was shaking so much inside that she didn't trust herself to continue. How could he possibly imagine that she would allow the memory of their bitter exchange to colour her reaction as he lay in pain, possibly dying? What did he think she was?

She began to turn away, willing him to fly away as he'd done the last time he'd been in this room with her. But a moment later she felt warm hands on her shoulders.

"Lois I'm sorry," his voice murmured softly from behind her. "I never thought that... really, I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I promise." A pause, and she could hear him sigh. "It's... I know I hurt you with the things I said that night, and I've wished so much that I could take them back, express myself differently...."

Tears streamed down her cheeks as Lois heard, simultaneously, Superman's soft-voiced apology in her ear, and in her head the harsh words he'd uttered all those weeks ago. She kept her back to him as he continued to speak.

"Lois, I would never use my powers to... to take advantage of you. I swear it." He paused again, then added in little more than a whisper, "I really wish I'd never said that. I could've cut my tongue out when I saw your face afterwards."

"Then why?" she demanded, swinging round to face him. "Why did you say it? I thought... I thought you were my friend," she finished on a whisper.

"Oh, Lois...." His voice was so soft she almost didn't hear him. Then, louder, he continued, "I *\*am\** your friend. I will always be

your friend - if you want me, that is. I... I was angry that night. But even still, it was inexcusable."

"Why were you angry?" she asked him, but then the answer came to her. "It was because I was putting you on a par with Lex Luthor, wasn't it? You knew he'd proposed to me, and when I said I had choices to make.... you knew it was between you and him." Her voice was soft, appalled, as she admitted the truth to him.

She saw him grimace wryly. "Something like that, Lois. But what I *should* have done was tell you the truth about Luthor - at least, what I could. But too much of what I knew was circumstantial, speculation - I really didn't have any hard evidence, or I'd have gone to the police."

Lois scrubbed at her eyes, but found her hand pushed aside suddenly as Superman dabbed gently at her face with the edge of his cape. "Sorry - I don't have anywhere to carry a handkerchief," he apologised wryly.

"That's okay," she whispered. Her Super-hero was suddenly again the reassuring, familiar and welcome figure he had been for her for the best part of a year, until she'd ruined it all by telling him she was 'so completely in love with him.' But were things really back to normal? Could they be, with her declaration of love between them?

She had to do something about that. Raising her gaze to meet his concerned brown eyes, she spoke softly but determinedly. "Superman, there's something I need to say to you."

Was that a flash of alarm in those dark eyes? Before she could lose her nerve, she hurried on. "What I said to you that night - about being in love with you - " Now there was definitely alarm in his expression. But she continued regardless, ignoring his attempt at interrupting her. "Superman - I... I should never have said it. I... I guess you were right, I really don't know you. I mean, I know you're a good man, the most honourable and decent man I know - but none of us really knows *you*\*. And - well, I'd appreciate it if we could both forget I ever said anything. I mean, how could I be in love with someone I hardly know?"

It cost her dearly to say those words; she did love Superman, more than she had ever loved anyone in her life before, Lois knew. And she would probably love him for the rest of her life. But if it was a choice between retracting her declaration and losing the friendship they had once had, she was prepared to lie. And, as she watched his face, saw the alarm change to relief, she was glad she'd done it.

"Lois... I'm glad," he murmured. "Believe me, I do care about you. You're one of the people who mean most to me, I promise you. But there are all sorts of reasons why... apart from anything else, if you were too closely associated with me, people would use you to get at me. Like today - Arianna Carlin knew that if she threatened you, I'd come."

Yes, that was true, Lois realised with a sense of guilt. She had become associated with Superman over the past year, partly because she'd got - been given - so many exclusives, but also because of her

own efforts in ensuring that he noticed her when she met him in public. That must have caused him some difficulty, she acknowledged. Today hadn't been the first occasion on which she had been used by someone to get Superman's attention.

"I've been thoughtless, I guess, Superman," she admitted honestly. "It never occurred to me that I was causing problems for you...."

"You're not," he replied quickly, though from his expression Lois wondered whether he was telling her the entire truth. "You *are* a friend, and I don't want to lose that. It's just... well, it would be better if we weren't associated publicly."

She smiled quickly, reassuringly. "I can live with that, Superman."

"Good," he replied, with an answering smile which made her heart turn over. She had seen Superman smile in that way a couple of times before, and it always made her want to melt. But he was now gazing at her enquiringly. "Lois?"

"Yes?"

He didn't answer, but his stance shifted and he opened his arms to her. With a small cry, she took a step forward and he closed his arms around her, hugging her close. Lois relaxed against him, her head in the hollow of his shoulder and her hands wrapped around his waist, loving the sensation of being held closely, warmly, by the man she loved and happy that their friendship seemed to be back on track. She could cope with keeping her feelings to herself, if it meant that she kept his friendship.

Too soon, his embrace loosened and he stepped back; as she raised her head to look at him, he reached up with his hand and tilted her chin upwards. His head lowered and he kissed her cheek in a whisper-soft gesture. "Goodnight, Lois," he murmured as he straightened.

As he backed away, Lois remembered. The Kryptonite! "Superman?"

"Yes?" He turned back, recognising from her tone that this was important.

"Superman, the Kryptonite," Lois said quickly. "Clark told me it'd be safe wrapped in lead, so I got some... and I think it's secure enough. But what should I do with it?"

He paused. "Ah. I think it must be safe since I haven't felt anything. I can get rid of it."

Superman waited by the window while Lois went to fetch the lead-wrapped bullet; she held it out to him and watched him take it gingerly. He studied the makeshift container before looking up with an amused grin. "That's pretty thoroughly wrapped, Lois!"

"I didn't want to take any chances," she told him.

He smiled again. "Thank you. I'm in your debt again."

Lois shrugged awkwardly. "Consider it a pay-off against some of those times you've saved my life."

He smiled crookedly at that. "Lois, I've never kept count." He tucked the package into his belt and stepped up onto the windowsill. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Superman," she whispered as he flew off.

Wrapping her arms about herself, she walked slowly into her bedroom and reflected on the encounter. It did feel good to know that she and Superman were friends again. The memory of the things he had said to her on that awful night had hurt so much, more than she was even prepared to admit to herself. And, despite what she'd said to Clark the previous evening, her acceptance of Lex's proposal had probably been largely due to that talk with Superman. He hadn't just told her there was no future for them that night, he had rejected her in such a way that she had begun to think she'd never known him. The cold, forbidding man who'd stood in her apartment that evening had borne no resemblance to the kind, courteous friend she thought she'd known. If he'd let her down gently, she might not have felt the need to run to a man who'd made it clear he did want her.

But Superman had now admitted that his behaviour that night had been out of character, and he'd apologised for his words - apologised in such a way that it had been obvious he'd been genuinely ashamed, Lois thought. He'd said he wanted them to be friends. Even if he didn't love her, she thought, it was an honour that he wanted her to be his friend.

She was struck suddenly by the thought that, on two consecutive evenings, she had rebuilt two friendships which were very precious to her. Clark last night, and Superman tonight, she mused.

And there was another strange parallel, too. She had lied to Superman about her feelings for him, because she wanted their friendship to resume without any awkwardness. This morning she had concluded that precisely the same reason lay behind Clark's withdrawal of his own declaration of love.

How sad, she mused as she began switching off lights preparatory to going to bed. Both of us lying about our feelings for the person we love, just so that we can keep their friendship.

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As he flew away from Lois's apartment, the image of Lois's face as she'd told him she had been wrong to say she was in love with him was burned into Clark's mind. Of course, it hadn't been \*him\* she'd said she loved, but Superman, but that hadn't stopped him feeling frozen inside momentarily as he'd listened to her. But regardless of that, her statement had been a relief in one way. He'd known for some time, of course, before the Luthor fiasco, that Lois had at the very least had a crush on the Superhero - a cartoon cut-out who doesn't exist, as he'd told himself angrily on a number of occasions. Her declaration of love, when it had finally happened, hadn't surprised him at all; by that time he'd made his own declaration as Clark and been turned down, and he'd expected that she was about to throw herself at Superman.

That hadn't excused his own behaviour in response, and he had been well aware that underneath his anger at Lois during the period of her engagement had been an element of guilt and self-hatred, blaming himself for sending her straight into Luthor's arms. She had denied that yesterday, which had come as a considerable relief.

But now she had told Superman that she didn't love him after all, and that she wanted to be friends. That was an advance, he thought. Perhaps, given that his own relationship with Lois, as Clark, was strengthening, there might be a chance that she could come to love him, the ordinary man, instead?

What was it she had said again? He thought, and came up with the words. 'How could I be in love with someone I hardly know?'

But... that wasn't the same as telling the Man of Steel that she didn't love him, he realised suddenly. And hadn't she, on that fateful night, insisted that she *did* know him, that she knew everything she needed to know about him?

That meant... it meant, he realised slowly, that perhaps she only wanted Superman to think that she didn't love him. But why would she do that? He was puzzled for a moment, until he remembered his own actions. He too had taken back his declaration of love for the sake of their friendship. He still believed he had been right to do it, too. If Lois had thought her best friend was still in love with her, she would never have allowed him to comfort her the way he had done the previous evening. She would certainly never have let him hold her in bed.

So did she still imagine herself in love with Superman? He couldn't be sure, but one thing he was sure about was that she couldn't really be in love with someone who didn't exist. It was simply crazy; her feelings were no more than infatuation, and perhaps she herself was beginning to realise it.

He sighed, and headed northwards. He had a piece of Kryptonite to dispose of, and he had decided that boring a hole thirty feet deep in the centre of the Arctic Circle was probably the best means of ensuring that it never saw the light of day again.

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Lois woke, sweating, and groped for the lamp beside her bed. It had been the dream again, that same nightmare which, with variants, had plagued her almost every night since the abortive wedding. But she hadn't had it the previous night.... Instinctively, her fingers reached for the bedside telephone.

The number she dialled was answered within two rings, and a sleepy voice muttered, "'Lo?"

"Clark? Oh, Clark, I'm so glad you're there," Lois exclaimed, barely waiting for him to wake up properly or to acknowledge her.

But he recovered pretty quickly, sounding much more alert as he responded to her agitation. "Lois? Are you okay? What's happened?" He sounded anxious.

"I've... had another dream. And it was horrible, Clark!"

His voice was suddenly soothing, gentle. "You're not dreaming now, Lois. You're awake and you're talking to me. So why don't you tell me about it? What happens in this dream?"

She inhaled sharply, her breath catching as she did so. "It's... I dream I'm married, Clark. To... Lex. And we're in bed together, he's with me, he's... having sex with me. And it's always the same, he's brutal and dominating, he says he wants to make me forget I ever thought of anyone else but him. And... he tells me he's killed people who got in his way before, and if I don't do what he wants he'll kill people I care about." She broke off with a shuddering sigh. "Clark, he forces me. Every time. And every time I have the dream, I see Perry... and my sister... and you, lying dead on the floor of the bedroom, and Lex is mocking me...." She trailed off, unable to speak as the tears ran down her face.

Clark had listened to Lois's recitation in silence, cold fury filling him as he realised just how much power Luthor seemed to have to hurt her, even in death. It shocked him to realise that during all the weeks when she had insisted that she was okay, she didn't need anyone's help, she had been having nightmares similar to this every night. No wonder she had begun to look like a pale shadow, a silent wraith slipping unobtrusively in and out of the office.

And he'd been foolish, conceited enough to assume that because he had helped her to talk about things the previous evening she would be okay from now on? He cursed his own naivety; the Lois Lane he'd known wouldn't have been knocked so badly off course just as a result of the fears and memories she had talked about to him then. This was far worse. She had mentioned nightmares, but he hadn't bothered to ask about them. Now he wished he had; she needed help to stop these.

"Lois?" He tried again, raising his voice so that she could hear him over her sobs. "Lois! I'm coming over, okay? I'll be with you in a few minutes, as quickly as I can. Will you be all right until I get there?"

Through her tears and the remnants of the nightmare, Clark's words penetrated Lois's consciousness. Realising only that he was going to hang up the phone and leave her to her own torment, she found her voice. "No, Clark - please, don't hang up. I need you to talk to me... please!"

Instantly his voice came back down the phone-line to her, firm, reassuring. "Lois, of course I won't hang up if you don't want me to. But I can come over. I can be at your place in...." He paused, wondering what would seem convincing. He could actually get there in about a second if he flew at hyper-speed, but she would never accept that without asking questions. The fastest he could get there by cab, assuming he got one immediately, would be about twenty minutes. But right now he wasn't prepared to leave her alone for that long.

He needed to talk to her, calm her down, wait until she'd put her terrors sufficiently behind her that she realised she was no longer dreaming. Then he could suggest that he'd come over; he could suggest that she make some tea while he was on his way.



"Lois, listen to me," he said, his voice deliberately firm. "You've been dreaming - it's a horrible dream, but it's over. Luthor is dead, and Perry and Lucy and I are alive. None of it happened, and I promise you that as long as I'm here none of it will happen."

He heard a shuddering sigh. "I know, Clark," she whispered. "Every time I wake up, I tell myself that. But then I try to go back to sleep and I'm terrified in case I have the same nightmare all over again."

"You didn't have it last night," he reminded her.

"No," she agreed, her voice becoming steadier. "You were there. I... think I felt safe because of that."

"I can be there again," he pointed out, this time confident that she was hearing him fully. "Give me fifteen minutes, Lois, and I'll be with you. I'll sit with you, or whatever you want, until you fall asleep again."

Lois listened to her friend's offer, at first instinctively wanting to grab at it with both hands. Clark would come, would hold her... she would be able to sleep again, with no more nightmares. He would keep her safe.

But then she remembered her thoughts about him that morning. He was a very special, caring friend; but he was also in love with her, she was pretty sure. Was it fair of her to take advantage of him like this? If he loved her, how could he bear to hold her in his arms and pretend he felt nothing?

But, another thought intruded, Clark *was* very special to her. What if she tried to return his love? She did have feelings for him, she had realised that on her wedding day. She had almost told him how she felt. Surely if she told him she wanted to be with him too, that wouldn't be taking advantage?

< It would if you're only looking for someone on the rebound> her conscience told her. < Clark's too good a man to be used like that>

Deliberately forcing her voice to sound calmer than she felt, she replied to Clark. "That's really kind of you, but it's not necessary. Really - I feel a lot better just from talking to you. I'll be fine now..." she yawned deliberately, "I'm pretty sleepy again already."

"If you're sure...." he offered.

"I'm sure. Thanks, Clark. Goodnight," she told him, and replaced the receiver.

Clark sat up in bed for a moment or two after she'd ended the call, before getting out of bed and quickly spinning into his Superman suit. A few seconds later, he was hovering in the clouds above Lois's apartment, remaining there until it was almost dawn and he was sure she was unlikely to be plagued by any more nightmares. For that night, at least.

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Over the next few days, Lois seemed to be back to her normal self. At work, she appeared confident and assertive, returning to her more normal style of dress and attitude. It felt good, she realised, to put away the more sober, plain suits she had been wearing of late and instead to wear her preferred stylish outfits, in some of the brighter colours she had been shunning over the past weeks.

It occurred to her that her altered dress sense had come about during the period of her engagement; she confided this to Clark over lunch one day after he'd complimented her on the thigh-length collarless jacket in royal blue which she was wearing over a short skirt. She'd glanced down at herself, and realised that what she'd thought was a random choice from her wardrobe actually hadn't been. Without realising it, she had reached right into the back, to find an outfit she had bought shortly before her engagement but never actually worn.

"Lex preferred me to wear more formal clothes," she told Clark quietly. "I never even realised it, but he completely changed the way I dressed. He used to tell me which designers he liked, what colours he liked... and he set up an account for me with his favourite couture house. I didn't really want to go along with it, but he said I'd be attending functions with him so I needed to be dressed appropriately, and that it wasn't fair for me to have to pay designer prices on my salary... I just agreed because it was simpler."

Another strike against Luthor, Clark thought, but didn't comment. Instead he smiled at her. "I've always thought you had great taste in clothes. There was a time when I even wanted you to advise me - when I first came to Metropolis. I know the kind of things I wore then were kind of... well, geeky."

Lois deliberately looked her partner up and down as he leaned back in his seat opposite her. Not bad, she thought; well-cut suit, crisp shirt... great body.... < Don't go there, Lois> she told herself. < It's not fair to him....> She returned her gaze to his face. "Pretty good, Clark. Nice suit - a much better cut than the sort of thing you used to wear. Where do you get those ties, though?" she added with an exaggerated grimace.

"I think they're great!" he protested. "It makes a change from plain and boring, anyway."

She grinned, and he raised an eyebrow at her in a challenging gesture. "Anyway, Lois, this is a huge improvement on the way you were dressed the other day in Stoke's club. I really thought you'd -"

"Lost my fashion sense, I know," she finished, giving him a mock-glare. "You know very well that was just to get the story. And I seem to remember you dressing like a down-and-out when you muscled in on my Metros investigation."

"A down-and-out?" he protested, laughing. "An out-of-work sailor, if you don't mind!"

She pulled a disbelieving face at him, and they both laughed.

"You really are looking better," Clark complimented her as they exited the deli a few minutes later.

"Yeah? I feel better," she told him. "You really helped me that night, you know."

"I hoped so - but then you had that nightmare again," he replied soberly. "I've been worried about you - I tried to call you last night to see if you wanted me to come over, but you were out."

Clark was so sweet, Lois thought, touched at his concern. "I went over to see my mother. She's been asking me to for weeks, but I just didn't feel I could cope with her. Now that I've got most of the Lex stuff out of my system I realised I could. And it wasn't so bad. We ate, we talked, I drank some wine, and we had a good time. And we talked about the future rather than the past, which was good."

Lois felt Clark's arm across her shoulders as he guided her into the Planet building. It was good to spend time with her partner. Perhaps they could spend more time together, as friends? Even if he was in love with her... it wouldn't hurt, surely?

Before she could think better of her idea, she caught his arm. "Clark - would you like to share takeout and a video tonight?"

His expression lit up, which caused her mixed feelings. "Yeah, I'd like that, Lois. You want to come to my place? After work?"

"Okay," she agreed, walking ahead of him into the elevator. Was this a good idea? Was he going to hope for more than she could offer? \*What\* could she offer him?

Wryly, she conceded that she wasn't even sure of that herself.

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"Okay, well, if you're planning on going home to get changed first, why don't you choose the videos and leave the takeout to me?" Clark offered as they left the Planet together later that day.

Lois raised an eyebrow at him. "Sure, if that means you're going to get some of that great Chinese only you seem able to find."

Clark grinned. Yes, a quick flight to Beijing shouldn't be too difficult to arrange... and he was pretty sure that he still had some Chinese currency at home, left over from his last trip. "No problem. And the movies... just don't get anything too soppy, okay?"

"Hey, last I knew you were the one who preferred the soppy ones over the action and adventure!" Lois teased in response. "Who wanted to get Beethoven instead of The Terminator?"

"Ummm... I was confusing it with Amadeus?" Clark offered, grinning broadly in acknowledgement of the fact that they both knew he really didn't care about being labelled soppy.

Half an hour later they reconvened at his apartment, and spent a lazy couple of hours amicably sharing Chinese food while watching '84

Charing Cross Road.' "I thought it'd be something different," Lois had explained when Clark had raised an eyebrow at the box. "Not an action film, but not soppy either."

"Oh, I've wanted to see this for a while, so it's a great choice," he'd reassured her.

Later, as the second movie played, Clark noticed Lois shift a little on the sofa, as if trying to get comfortable. She had slipped off her shoes some time earlier, and was trying to curl up with her feet up. He hesitated, then reached out his arm towards her, hooking it around her shoulders. "Come here."

She came willingly, allowing him to settle her against him, her back and shoulders resting against his chest as he shifted to sit sideways on the couch. "How's that?" he asked. "Better?"

She twisted her head so that she could look him in the eye. "It's nice, Clark," she told him honestly. But her hands pulled at the edge of her sweatshirt, telling him that she was uneasy about something.

"Come on, what is it?" he asked, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Lois, you've never exactly been one to hold back...."

"I guess not," she admitted. "Clark - this is really nice, I love being with you like this. I feel so comfortable with you, like I can always rely on you to be there for me when I need a friend."

"You can, Lois," he promised huskily, his arm tightening around her shoulders.

"But... Clark, I'm just concerned... well, we never really talked properly about, um... about your feelings for me," Lois finished in a rush. This needed to be said, she decided. Otherwise it wasn't fair on Clark. She couldn't just continue to ignore what she suspected; that would be tantamount to using him, taking advantage of his feelings for her.

"My feelings?" Clark echoed, a confused note in his voice. It sounded very convincing, but Lois wasn't completely taken in.

"Yes, Clark - we need to talk about this." She twisted in his arms so that she was looking at him, but didn't pull away from him. "The day you came to see me at LNN... you told me you loved me. And you were right - I had known it. I just... pretended I didn't. That was wrong of me. I shouldn't have done that, it meant that I was taking advantage of your friendship. That's why we need to talk about this now, because I really value your friendship and I don't want us to spend the next months or whatever walking on eggshells around each other because neither of us is prepared to admit what's going on."

"And what is going on?" Clark asked in a low voice, after several moment's hesitation.

"You're in love with me," she told him bluntly, and saw the shock in his eyes at her words. Shock... and also acknowledgement that she'd spoken the truth.

Quietly, he protested, "You know I told you I'd only said that to stop you marrying - " He broke off before the name was uttered.

"Yes, I know you said that," Lois replied equally quietly. "At the time I believed you - and you know, Clark, I was hurt that you'd lie to me about your feelings like that. But... I only really started to think about this properly a few days ago - up to then I wasn't really thinking straight about anything. But the night you stayed with me at my apartment, you told me that you were sorry you'd told me you loved me because I wasn't ready to hear it. That's what you said. Not that you shouldn't have said it because it wasn't true."

He had said that; and at the time he had never realised just what he was giving away, Clark thought as he sat frozen to the spot. He inhaled sharply. "Lois, I'm sorry...."

"Don't be," she cut in quickly. "Clark - you know I care about you. There isn't anyone who means more to me than you - "

"Except Superman," Clark pointed out, a note of bitterness he couldn't help creeping into his voice.

Lois grimaced. "Yeah, okay, if we're being honest here, I do have strong feelings for Superman. But you know, much as I'm attracted to him I have to admit that he's not the first person I think of when I need to be with someone. He's not who I called three nights ago when I was having a nightmare - and he's not who I wanted to be with tonight," she finished slowly.

Clark was silent for a moment. Then he asked hesitantly, "What are you saying, Lois? That you...?"

She shook her head. "Clark, I don't know, is the answer. You... I'm just so confused. I mean, a couple of months ago I thought I was crazily in love with Superman, then he rejected me and I agreed to marry Lex, and... and the one person I missed most during that time was \*you,\* Clark. And when I finally came to my senses and realised I couldn't marry Lex it wasn't because of Superman or because I accepted I didn't love Lex - "

"Wait a minute!" Clark interrupted, dropping his arm from around Lois's shoulders and twisting so that he was facing her directly. "\*You\* realised you couldn't marry him? When was that?"

"Oh!" Lois exclaimed suddenly, realising that, of course, Clark still didn't know the truth about the wedding. "Clark, Perry and the police didn't stop the wedding. I did. All the time I was getting ready, walking down the aisle, during the ceremony... I knew it wasn't right. And when the Archbishop asked me whether I took Lex to be my... well, anyway, I said I couldn't."

"\*You\* said no?" Clark was obviously having difficulty taking this in.

"Yes," she answered, smiling hesitantly at him. "But in the confusion, I don't think anyone other than Lex and the Archbishop realised that."

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

Lois blinked at the abrupt question. This was the difficult bit, she realised. If she told Clark why she had really stopped the ceremony, what would he think? And would it be fair to give him false hope, when she wasn't even sure what her feelings for him - for anyone - were? When she was pretty sure that she just wasn't ready for another relationship?

She took a deep breath and decided to approach it from another angle. "Clark - when you told me, outside the Planet, that you didn't really love me, why did you do it?"

He hesitated, and she could see a multitude of emotions crossing his face. Then he sighed and obviously decided to be honest with her. "Because I wanted us to be able to go back to being friends, the way we were. I thought you might find it hard to be comfortable with me if you thought I still loved you."

She nodded, as if it had been what she'd been expecting. Her next question surprised Clark even more. "Did you ever wonder what it was I was going to say - you know, when you insisted on going first?"

Clark hesitated again, and this time Lois suspected that he was going to avoid answering her. She reached out and took his hand between her two small ones, realising with a shock that he was shaking a little. Nervousness? But Clark did seem to lack confidence sometimes. She would have to have courage for both of them.

"Clark... I was going to tell you that I'd been having second thoughts about us," she explained, at the last minute finding herself unable to look at him as she spoke. Gazing down at her lap, she added, "I was confused, okay? When I was getting ready for the wedding, when I was walking down the aisle, all I could think of was you. Not Lex - not even Superman. Just you. And... well, I couldn't go ahead with the wedding."

His hand tightened in her grasp. "Lois - you stopped your wedding because of \*me\*?" His voice cracked on the last word, his tone incredulous.

"Yeah," she whispered. "But Clark - yeah, I was going to tell you then that maybe I had feelings for you too. But... right now I just don't know what I feel. All I do know is that I don't think I'm ready for another relationship at the moment, and I'm afraid that if I let myself start something with you... it could be a rebound thing, and I'd only end up hurting you." He was silent, though she felt his gaze on her. "Clark - the last thing I want to do is hurt you, or lose your friendship. I know I'd do both if we got... involved... and it went wrong."

"It mightn't go wrong," he whispered, an almost instinctive protest, but then added in a wry tone, "You're right, Lois, I think it's too soon for you too. I - I don't want to be just the one who helps you forget being in Luthor's arms - his bed. If you get involved with me, I want it to be because you want to \*be\* with me."

"I never slept with him, Clark!" Lois exclaimed, realising the implication of what he'd said. "I only ever let him kiss me - I said I wanted to wait, and he was very... very charming about it,

actually."

"Well, okay," Clark said roughly, "but I'm not going to let you kiss me either just to blot out the memory of his kisses. I'll be here for you any time you want to talk, to exorcise the memories that way, but - like you said, I'd rather be your friend than a temporary rebound boyfriend."

"I'm glad," she told him sincerely. "But, Clark - I've wondered, you know, whether it'd be fairer to you if we stopped being friends, maybe stopped working together?" His appalled, hurt expression told her what he thought of that. "Look, I didn't mean that \*I\* want to stop spending time with you, Clark," she added quickly. "I'd really hate that - I missed you so much as it was. But knowing how you feel...?"

He shook his head roughly. "Lois, I said I'd rather have you as a friend. I meant that. I don't think I could stand to lose you a second time. That's why I took back what I'd said about loving you."

She nodded, feeling a pang of guilt for the hurt she clearly had caused Clark by raising the subject, but also relieved that the whole issue was now out in the open. He was still sitting apart from her, though his hand lay between hers still, limply now, but he'd made no effort to withdraw it. "Clark - would you prefer I'd never mentioned this?" Lois asked him anxiously.

He sighed heavily, then turned to face her again. To her relief, his hand curled around hers warmly, and he smiled briefly.

"No, you're right. We needed to be honest with one another - and I have to admit, I felt almost as if I was being with you on false pretences too. The other night, when you wanted me to stay with you - I knew you just wanted a friend, but I was so afraid you'd guess how I really felt about you...." He trailed off awkwardly as he realised just how she might have worked that out.

Lois recognised his embarrassment and decided to make things easier for him. Squeezing his hand, she raised her gaze to his and grinned. "I thought that was pretty much a normal thing with men in the morning," she teased him. He flushed, but then seeing that she was laughing, he laughed with her.

"I guess it is," he agreed. "You know, I really hoped you hadn't noticed...."

"I noticed," she told him. "And... um, I was flattered. Then I remembered that it probably was just automatic."

Lois's matter-of-fact handling of the situation encouraged Clark to be more open with her. "Not really," he told her. "In fact, I kind of often have that reaction around you."

Now it was Lois's turn to be embarrassed. But she pushed that aside and regarded Clark thoughtfully. "I'm glad we could be honest with each other. But... where do we go from here?"

"Friends?" he asked, his voice hopeful. "Best friends?"

"You know that," she assured him. "But... well, I don't want to suggest that I'm making any promises, but I think we're sort of more than that, aren't we?"

Clark hesitated, not sure precisely what Lois was suggesting. He knew she wasn't suggesting that they start dating - he'd made his own feelings clear about that anyway. But - more than friends, not quite romantic partners...? "How about - not defined?" he suggested softly."

"Not defined?" she queried, her expression puzzled.

Clark smiled wryly. "Remember Linda King?" he asked, smiling in amusement at the quick frown he got in response. "You *were* jealous! I knew it!" he teased her, adding quickly, "There was never anything - you know I was only getting to know her in order to trap Carpenter. But anyway, she asked about our relationship - whether we were friends or something more. I don't know whether it was just wishful thinking, or whether I really hoped for more at the time, but I told her our relationship was 'not defined'."

Lois smiled suddenly, an expression which lit up her entire face. "I like it, Clark."

"Good." He reached for her suddenly, and she went into his arms willingly, welcoming the warm hug as an outward symbol of their renewed vow of friendship.

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Breaking the embrace a few minutes later, Clark reached for the remote control and shut off the video they'd been ignoring for the last hour. When Lois looked at him enquiringly, he smiled ruefully at her. "You weren't exactly watching it, were you?"

She shrugged. "Guess not. But we can watch it now?"

"If you want," he agreed. "But hey - I've just remembered, I have some ice-cream. Your favourite too, double chocolate chip - want some?" Her broad grin gave him his answer, and he stood up. "Stay there. Be back in two minutes."

In the kitchen, as he scooped ice-cream into a bowl for Lois, Clark reflected on their conversation. He still felt as if he was in shock from some of the things they'd talked about. He was hardly able to believe that he had really admitted his true feelings to her - and that she'd intimated that she felt more for him than friendship. It had been so tempting to push her on that, he realised. He had been so close to reaching for her, trying to persuade her that her feelings were real, once he'd understood the significance of what she'd told him. He could have taken her into his arms, kissed her - he was fairly sure she wouldn't have resisted. He knew she'd responded to kisses from him before, both as Clark and as Superman, and if he'd kissed her the way Superman had once before, when he'd pretended to be under the influence of the pheromone, he was sure that she would have wanted more. Not that he would have taken things much further, but.... He could have tried to talk her into a relationship with him. He could probably have overcome her doubts about it being a rebound thing on her part, her reluctance to hurt him.



And it had been so tempting... what he'd wanted for so long had been just within his grasp. But he'd known it wasn't right. It was too soon - not just for Lois, but for him as well. She wasn't the only one who had memories to exorcise. He had only just realised that, he thought in surprise. When she'd talked about being afraid of a rebound relationship, the image of her kissing Luthor had floated into his mind. Then he'd known that not only didn't he want to be a substitute for anyone, but he didn't want to become Lois's boyfriend... lover... while the memories of her rejecting him for Luthor, her being with Luthor, were still so fresh. And he knew she still wasn't over that relationship; no matter how much she protested, Luthor was very much on her mind.

So, he thought with a wry grimace, we wait and see. We work at being friends and helping each other to forget. Except that she doesn't know she's not the only one who needs to forget....

He shook himself mentally and carried the ice-cream through to the living room, only to stop short when he saw Lois fast asleep on the couch. Shaking his head in wry amusement, he put the bowl down on the table and bent to scoop Lois into his arms, carrying her through to his bedroom. She woke as he laid her on the bed, blinking at him in confusion.

"Clark... what...?"

"It's okay, Lois. You fell asleep," he explained softly. "You might as well stay here tonight."

"I can go home...." she began to protest, but he shook his head.

"No need. Friends sleep over at each other's apartments, right? Anyway, you fell asleep out there. I don't want to worry about you falling asleep at the wheel."

Lois yawned, and that seemed to seal it for her. "Okay, but I can sleep on the couch. I don't have to take your bed."

"Uh-uh," he tutted at her. "You take the bed. I'll..." he walked to the large window-seat and grabbed the day-pillows which lay there, then found an extra blanket, "take the couch."

He was out of the room before she could protest again, and within minutes she was asleep.

Clark waited until he was sure she was sound asleep before floating silently out onto his balcony and taking off to do a late patrol. He considered himself fortunate that there'd been no calls for Superman earlier, but he did need to do a check now.

Letting himself silently back into the apartment a little under an hour later after two rescues, one arrest and the prevention of one accident, he X-rayed the bedroom briefly to check on his guest. She seemed to be sleeping soundly, so he stripped to T-shirt and shorts and made up his bed on the couch.

Some time later, Clark jerked upright at the sound of panicked cries. "No! Lex... no, please, no! Don't...!"

He was in the bedroom in under a second, only pausing to grab his glasses, and his heart wrenched at the sight of Lois, tossing and turning in his bed with an anguished expression on her face, moaning and crying out. She seemed to be asleep still, and he carefully sat beside her, reaching for her hand.

"Lois - Lois, wake up. It's just a dream. Lois, I'm here, wake up," he called, not too loudly for fear of frightening her.

Suddenly her eyes opened wide and she stared directly at him. "Clark...? What... I was dreaming again, wasn't I?"

"Yes," he told her. "Was it the same - he was forcing you?"

She shook her head, her expression still fearful. "You know, I thought I was over it... I haven't had a nightmare since the night I called you. Though I guess we've been busy catching Lenny Stoke and we had a few late nights...." She trailed off, then clutched at his arm. "Then tonight... Clark, it was you!"

"Me?" He stared at her in horror. "You were having a nightmare about me?"

She quickly shook her head, seeing that he had misunderstood her. "No, Lex was going to kill you. He was forcing me to watch - he had you in a cage. He was going to shoot you - he had the gun, and he made me watch as he put the bullets in it, and you weren't able to move, and... and he was going to pull the trigger. That's when I woke up," she finished shakily.

Clark pulled her, unresisting, into his arms, holding her close against him. "I'm safe, Lois. He's dead - he can't hurt me. Or you."

She lay passively in his arms, welcoming the comfort, for several minutes. Then she pulled back and stared at Clark again, this time puzzled rather than agitated. "Clark... what I didn't understand was... the cage. The bars were green - glowing green!"

Clark went briefly rigid with shock, but forced himself to reply. "Lois, you must have remembered what I told you about Superman - you know, the Kryptonite cage? That must have got mixed up in your dream. Maybe it was him you were seeing, not me."

"No, it was definitely you, Clark," Lois insisted. "But you're right, it's weird that I should remember what happened to Superman and apply it to you."

Suddenly, crazily, the idea entered Clark's head that he should tell her the truth: that there was nothing strange about it at all because \*he\* was Superman. For an instant he felt light-headed at the prospect of telling her, of having all his secrets out in the open. No more lying to her, no more stupid excuses for dashing off, no more 'Superman/Clark told me,' depending on which one of his alter egos he was being at that particular time.

But sanity hit him just in time. Oh, of course he could \*trust\* her with his secret - that wasn't the issue. The question was really about whether she was ready to hear it. Her feelings about the Super-hero were clearly still very much an issue, quite apart from

the Lex question, and he still felt that he wanted her to love \*him,\* Clark, not his creation. To tell her he was Superman, and then to have her swear undying love to him after all, would be too painful to bear.

He evaded the issue in the end, simply continuing to hold her. After a while, he asked the question which had been on his mind since she'd called him after the other nightmare. "Was Luthor ever violent towards you?"

Lois shook her head, her expression puzzled. "Actually, no - he was always very urbane, charming... he always seemed to consider what I wanted, he seemed to want to please me. But... I guess I always knew that underneath he could be ruthless - and he even told me that he hadn't got to where he was without doing a few things he was ashamed of. No, the nightmares... I've only had them since I found out what he was really capable of."

So was she actually happy with Luthor during her engagement? Clark wondered, then asked himself why he was torturing himself with such thoughts. He fell silent for a few moments, continuing to hold Lois reassuringly, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Whatever she claimed, she was not over Luthor yet, and that bothered him.

Lois, gradually emerging from the aftermath of the nightmare, noticed Clark's abstraction. His expression suggested to her that he was brooding about something. She reached for his arm, attracting his attention. "Clark...? What is it?"

"What...?" He turned his gaze to hers, and she wondered at the pain in his eyes.

"Clark - what's eating you? Come on, you can tell me. We're friends - you can tell me anything." She reached up and laid the palm of her hand flat against his cheek; briefly, he tensed, but then relaxed and pressed his face against her hand.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet, sounding almost as if it came from far away. "Lois, you won't like this, but... I just keep thinking of you with him. I mean, you were dating him, then you were engaged to him.... I'm not just talking about him kissing you, holding you, though I have to be honest, the thought of that murdering criminal's hands on you does make me...." He trailed off, drew a shuddering sigh, then continued. "You were his fiancée - you spent time with him, talked with him, had fun with him - at least I assume you did, or you wouldn't have been planning to marry him. And... I know I have no right to feel this way, but I can't help thinking about it and it drives me insane."

Lois stared at him in dawning realisation. Of course it would bother him that she'd been close to Lex - he loved her! "Oh, Clark - and I've been telling you about things that happened when I was with him! I should never have - "

"No!" he interrupted her in a fierce whisper. "Lois, if you can bear to tell me, I want to know. I guess... if you don't tell me, what I imagine's probably going to be worse than the truth."

"You did think I'd slept with him, didn't you?" she asked quickly, already anticipating the answer.

Clark shrugged. "Well, you were going to marry him... it's pretty much the normal thing, isn't it?"

"I wanted to wait," she explained. "I know it sounds weird - I mean, it's not as if I was a... anyway, I wanted to wait, and Lex seemed to think it was quite charming and old-fashioned." She hesitated, deciding that Clark deserved the truth. "It was nothing to do with any romantic idea of making our wedding night special," she admitted. "I just... I guess I knew I wasn't in love with him, and so I wasn't exactly impatient."

Clark didn't comment, though his downcast head seemed to hide an embarrassed flush but, she thought, there were also some signs that he was relieved. She reached for his hand and held it in hers as she continued her explanation. "You see, Clark, Lex really was very good at hiding what he really was. I know you never trusted him, but he could be so charming, and he was good company. Not in the way you are - I mean, I could never have imagined vegging out with takeout and a video with him, but he was cultured and intelligent and he knew how to make me feel... appreciated. I guess part of me found that flattering."

This time Clark nodded, and he raised his head a little to allow her to see his face again. As he did so, Lois yawned involuntarily, and that made her give him a wry smile. "I don't think this is the best time for this conversation, huh? We should get some sleep."

"Sure," he agreed instantly, starting to rise off the bed. But she gripped his hand, tugging him back.

"Stay, Clark," she whispered. "I don't think I'm likely to have another nightmare, but you never know... I'd appreciate the company."

He hesitated. "Lois, is this sensible? After what we talked about...?"

"Clark, I trust you," she replied instantly. "You \*know\* that - and I know we're both tired, and all either of us wants is to sleep. I don't know about you, but I think being held would... help me to forget."

"Yeah, me too," he whispered. "Okay, if you're sure."

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Lois blinked a couple of times as the unfamiliar dawn rays began to penetrate into the bedroom. Her own bedroom had thick curtains which blocked out any sign of morning until she was ready to face the world; disorientated, she had to concentrate in order to remember where she was. As her vision came into focus, she realised that her face was mere inches away from another face: a handsome, very masculine face, with untidy dark hair falling forward over a high forehead, and chiselled features culminating in a strong jawline.

Clark. Their conversation of early that morning came back to her in that instant, and she remembered asking him to stay with her. He had

joined her in the bed, drawing her close to him to lie with her head on his chest. His presence, and his reassuring touch, had been immensely comforting and she had fallen asleep again with his hand rhythmically stroking her hair. At some time during the night they must have moved apart, for they were now lying facing each other.

She realised suddenly that she had never really taken the opportunity to study Clark's features so closely before. She certainly had never seen him without glasses, and she was surprised to realise how different he looked. Younger, somehow, more relaxed. There was also something strangely familiar about him... she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was, but something was nagging her about his appearance.

As she tried to work out what it was, his eyelids flickered open and she found herself staring into his deep brown eyes, for the first time without the barrier of glasses. He met her gaze, unblinking, and they simply looked at each other in silence for a long moment; Lois couldn't have said how long.

Then it seemed as if they moved in unison; neither spoke, but they drew closer and in an instant Clark's lips closed over hers. With a soft cry she returned his kiss, her lips opening in response to the insistent pressure of his. They kissed, mouths clinging, tongues embracing, until eventually Lois had to come up for air. Her gasp of shock as she did so seemed to jolt them both out of the spell which had hung over them since the instant their eyes had locked.

Clark reacted first, sitting upright and, in a swift gesture, grabbing his glasses to thrust them back on his face. An embarrassed flush creeping up his neck and across his cheeks, he then half-turned towards Lois and began to mutter incoherent apologies.

Lois, equally embarrassed, slid towards the edge of the bed, groping for her sweatshirt since the T-shirt she'd worn to sleep in was rucked up and was clinging to her slim form. Avoiding Clark's gaze, she muttered, "I'm sorry... we shouldn't.... oh, God, this is so embarrassing!"

"I'll go," Clark declared, throwing back the covers and making his escape from the bedroom. Lois looked away as he left, before seizing the opportunity to hurry into the bathroom.

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Clark stood in the middle of the kitchen, still reeling from what had just happened. The kiss had been so unexpected... but so sweet, so passionate, so loving. One minute he had been half-asleep, dreaming about holding Lois's warm body next to his, and the next he had been awake, gazing into her soft brown eyes, eyes which seemed to look directly into his soul.

He was still unsure which of them had made the first move. The kiss had just happened... and it had seemed so right. He had been completely caught up in the emotion of what had happened; he had wanted to go on kissing Lois for an eternity. It hadn't even crossed his mind at the time to consider taking things any further; to kiss her and have her kiss him in return was enough.

Until she'd pulled back momentarily, and her brief withdrawal had recalled both of them to their surroundings and to reality. He had been as shocked as she had to realise what had happened, and embarrassment had hit them simultaneously, he had recognised from Lois's own reaction.

Then he'd realised he hadn't even been wearing his glasses, and she'd been staring directly at him... he still wasn't sure now whether she'd figured out his secret. Had she realised he was Superman, and had that made her more willing to kiss him? He didn't think so, but he was unable to stop his inner self torturing himself with the possibility.

If she hadn't recognised him then, it was perfectly possible that she would put two and two together later, he conceded, and mentally prepared himself for a confrontation once she emerged from the bedroom.

In the meantime, there was the question of the kiss, and where they should go from there. If anywhere, he mused soberly; she had been as shocked as he had himself, and about the only words she'd uttered, apart from how embarrassing it was, were that they 'shouldn't'. That wasn't too difficult to interpret: she was regretting it already.

And so should he, he told himself stiffly. He'd told her only the previous evening that, whatever his feelings for her, he had no intention of trying to take their relationship any further while her own feelings were in the confused state she had admitted they were. She was still not over the nightmare of being engaged to that monster, having believed that she cared for him enough to marry him. Kissing her had been the wrong thing to do in the circumstances. That was beyond doubt. Hell, even staying in the same bed with her had been a mistake. There was clearly something there, some attraction on her part as well, and if she hadn't broken the kiss to come up for air, who knew what would have happened? As much as he wanted to be there for her when she had nightmares, he decided that he couldn't sleep with her again.

So what now?

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Lois dressed quickly in the clothes she'd been wearing the previous evening and crept quietly out of Clark's bedroom, wondering as she did so whether there was any possibility of slipping out of the apartment without Clark noticing. She wasn't sure she could face him after what had happened. What would he be thinking? Was he as embarrassed as she was? Or was he perhaps taking their kiss as an indication that their relationship could become more intimate? Did he want that? He was in love with her, so... but on the other hand, he'd made it clear that he wasn't prepared to accept half-measures from her.

How did she feel about their kiss? She had tried, while in the shower, to put her feelings into perspective, but had failed miserably. The kiss had been... spectacular. There was no doubt about that. The touch of Clark's lips, his tongue, the emotion of the moment had made her head spin. She had wanted to stay there all morning, exploring those surprisingly-mobile lips, discovering what

other hidden talents her best friend possessed. And then she had come to her senses and realised that kissing Clark was probably not the most sensible thing to do.

Who needs sensible? her inner voice had tried to argue. After all, Clark was a great-looking guy, warm, affectionate, caring - and she found him attractive. Kissing him had been one heck of an experience - a rollercoaster ride of heady pleasure and deep, sensual emotion. Why not take that step with him over the line between friendship and something more?

Because, her conscience had interjected, only the previous evening she had admitted her confusion about the state of her feelings. She was still completely messed up inside after the Lex affair, and only a few days earlier she had conceded to herself that she was still in love with Superman. Given that she knew how Clark felt about her, how could it be fair to mess with his feelings when she was so unsure of her own? He'd told her, just a few hours earlier, that he didn't want to be a rebound affair, someone she used to help her recover from Lex.

No, the kiss had been a mistake.

As she rounded the corner into the kitchen, Lois realised that her chances of slipping out unseen were nil: Clark was laying the table for breakfast. He was still wearing the T-shirt he'd slept in, but had pulled on a pair of jeans over his shorts. He glanced up as she emerged, and she saw that his expression was rueful.

"Hi, Lois," he said, his tone half-embarrassed, half-determined. "Can you give me five minutes to take a shower? Help yourself to coffee."

"Um... that's okay, I need to get home and change anyway," she hedged, indicating her intention to leave immediately.

But something about his stance compelled her to meet his gaze, and she allowed herself to face him rather than edging towards the door. There was understanding in his expression, together with a silent plea for her not to run away from this. "We need to talk, Lois," he said softly after a few moments. "I won't be long, I promise."

She sat at the table cradling a cup of coffee, her brain awl as she wondered just what Clark intended to say. Had he changed his mind about what he wanted? Or was he regretting what had happened as much as she was... or thought she was?

< Oh, what's happening to me?> she wailed silently. < I kiss my partner, and now I can't decide whether I regret it or not!>

He was back sooner than she'd expected, dressed ready for work in a dark suit and with his damp hair combed back in its usual formal style. Although she had to admit that Clark was certainly attractive like this, she found herself reminiscing about the younger-looking, more vulnerable man she had awakened to find herself in bed with.

He helped himself to coffee and seated himself opposite her.

"Lois - "

"Clark - "

He grinned wryly, gesturing at her. "I guess it's your turn to go first."

The grin, Lois realised, actually covered a lot of nervousness; she studied her partner and best friend for a moment, taking in his unsteady hands and the nervous tic in his jaw. He was also chewing his lip, a typical indicator that Clark was agitated. How well she knew him, she reflected suddenly.

"Clark, what happened earlier... well, I guess we both agree that it shouldn't have," she began, and was relieved to see that he was nodding agreement. "But I don't want you to think that... that I regret it completely - I mean, I know we agreed last night that... and I think we were right," she finished, stumbling over her words and hoping he'd understand what she was trying to say.

"Yeah, we agreed," he confirmed softly. "And... no, I can't regret it either. I... it was beautiful, Lois. But I don't want to be a substitute for anyone, where you're concerned. So I think we shouldn't let it happen again. Maybe my staying with you last night was wrong - I don't know. I know you only wanted reassurance, and believe me, I wanted to be there for you. But... Lois, I can try, but I can't completely hide what I feel for you."

He didn't want to be a substitute.... Lois understood what he was telling her, and he was right. As she had told herself, it wouldn't be fair. Oh, compared to Lex Clark could never be a mere substitute: he was something Lex could never be. Clark's innate goodness, honesty, basic decency were all character traits Lex not only did not possess, but which he had seemed to despise. But compared to Superman.... If Lois was honest with herself, she couldn't say where Clark came in a comparison with Superman.

But it was crazy even to hope for a relationship with the Man of Steel; if only she could put him completely out of her mind and....

And what? Settle for Clark? \*Settling\* for Clark was precisely what he was telling her he couldn't accept from her. No, if she and Clark were going to have a relationship, it would be because she had chosen him over Superman. And right now she wasn't sure whether she could do that.

Grateful to Clark now that he had prevented her from running away from the situation, she raised her eyes again to meet his gaze and reached her hand across the table to his. "You're right, Clark. I care too much about you to offer you anything less than... unconditional commitment. And I'm just not ready for that yet - with anyone, I think. So... 'not defined,' okay?"

His hand closed about hers. "Not defined."

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The following morning in the newsroom, Clark brought Lois her usual coffee and doughnut, but lingered at her desk. "You still coming to the Kerths tonight with me?"



She swivelled in her chair in order to look up at him, and raised her eyebrow. "You mean to hang on your arm and tell people how proud I am of my great big reporter-man?"

"Well, that sounds good to me...." he grinned.

"Sure - I said I'd come, didn't I? And by the way... I'm sorry I was so mean to you when the nominations were announced," Lois added with a wry, apologetic smile. "I was pretty childish actually, and I never even told you how proud I am that you got nominated."

Clark hesitated. "You're really proud of me?"

"Sure I am! Oh, I know, you'd never have guessed, but... yeah. You're a great reporter, Clark, you really deserved that nomination. And I hope you win tonight."

"Well, I was pretty stunned, you know, Lois," he told her. "I really wasn't expecting it - I was sure you'd get nominated, and when you didn't and I did... well, I wish you had too."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "So do I! And I still think I deserved to - but I didn't and you did, and the Daily Planet will put on a great show tonight in support of its top reporter... well, its top \*nominated\* reporter, that is."

Clark laughed aloud at that. "It's okay, Lois, I haven't forgotten who's top banana around here! I know you're the best, and it was sheer luck, or oversight, that I got nominated and you didn't."

She patted his arm. "Make the most of it, partner, because it's the only year it'll happen!"

Clark smiled and began to walk away, then turned back. "I never got a chance to tell you - yeah, sure, I'm really happy to be nominated, but I'd have been happier still if the nomination had been Lane \*and\* Kent. We've done some great stories together - like the expose of Congressman Harrington last spring? We're a team. And that's the way I like it."

< We're a team....> Lois mused on Clark's words as she turned back to her screen. Yes, they were a team, had been since Perry had partnered them permanently almost a year before. And despite her initial reservations, she \*liked\* working with Clark. They complemented each other so well: her grittiness and scepticism together with his genuine concern and social conscience - that same social conscience which had earned him the Kerth nomination for his story on the retirement homes scandal, she admitted wryly. Each was a talented writer in their own right, intelligent, resourceful and motivated; together, they were an almost unbeatable combination. And he was so good at second-guessing her, she realised. A number of times, when they'd been undercover in some guise or other, he had followed her lead so intuitively that she'd almost wondered whether he was some sort of mind-reader. Of course, there were times when she'd shown herself to be a very quick thinker when \*he\* seemed unable to come up with a plausible excuse; but that was all part of being a team.

Yes, work-wise they were a great team, apart from the times he simply

disappeared without giving her any explanation for his departures. That still puzzled her, and it was about the only thing she found irritating about Clark these days. But could they be more than friends and partners? Lois had found herself thinking about the possibilities for herself and Clark several times since their heart-to-heart the night she'd stayed at his apartment. Now that he'd admitted his feelings for her, the subject of their relationship was very much in her mind. It had helped to get all the emotional stuff out in the open, she knew. She suspected that in some ways Clark was relieved that he no longer had to hide his feelings for her, and he also seemed to trust her not to take advantage of him. For her part, Lois had found it such a relief to be completely honest with Clark about her emotions, the fact that she was completely confused. He seemed to understand, and it was immensely flattering to know that he was willing to wait for her to decide what her own feelings for him were.

Though she couldn't keep him waiting indefinitely, she knew. Clark deserved better than that. Grimacing, she allowed her thoughts to dwell on Superman for a moment. If only her heart would accept what her brain already had: there was no future in her feelings for the Man of Steel. He wasn't interested: he'd made it clear that although he cared for her as a friend, he could not have a relationship with her, even supposing he wanted to. And he certainly had given her no indication that he was remotely interested in anything more than friendship, even if that was possible.

"Lois? Where's that 'Wall of Sound' follow-up?" Perry's growl interrupted her thoughts. "You know deadline for the afternoon edition's in half an hour."

"On it, Chief," she muttered quickly.

"Well, make sure it's done," he reiterated. "And I want to see you and Clark later for an update on your work in progress. I know Clark's up for an award tonight, but you know as well as I do that a reporter's only as good as their next story."

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The Kerth ceremony passed off without a hitch, and Lois cheered more enthusiastically than anyone else in the room as Clark was announced the winner of the award for investigative journalism. She had to laugh at the expression on his face - completely stunned - before she reached across and gave him a good-natured shove. "Get up there, award-winning reporter, you! You have a speech to make!"

He made a great speech, first of all referring to the social and political issues raised by his award-winning story, and then becoming more personal as he referred to his time at the Planet. "I've been at the Planet only a little over a year," he declared, his tone altering from the confident pitch he had adopted a moment before to a more personal cadence. "I want to say how much I owe to Perry White, who took a chance on a relatively inexperienced reporter - for that I'll always be grateful. And I want to say a particular thanks to a very special person, who taught me everything I know about working for a great Metropolitan newspaper - Lois Lane, my partner and friend. Some time, I hope it'll be Lane and Kent up here together accepting an award."

As Clark returned to their table, Lois got to her feet and gave him a spontaneous hug; his eyes shining, he hugged her back and, for the remainder of the ceremony, they held hands beneath the table. The intimate gesture seemed right, somehow, although neither of them was reading anything into it.

The ceremony over, Clark escorted Lois out of the building, asking whether she wanted to take a cab. She looked thoughtfully up at the night sky before smiling back at him.

"It's a beautiful night, let's walk," she suggested, knowing that they were only a little under a mile from her apartment. He offered her his arm and they set off.

She turned to grin at him after a moment. "So, how did I rate as a date?"

Smiling back at her, Clark entered into the spirit of her mood. "Oh, A-plus."

"I hung on your arm decoratively," she observed, still smiling.

"You did."

"Fawned appropriately."

"Absolutely." "And just faded into the background during your big moment."

"You were beautiful yet invisible," he assured her.

Beautiful? she thought; you know how to flatter a woman, Kent. "Mmm, make me go through another night like that, and I'll rip out your spleen," she informed him in a mock-threatening voice, breaking down into helpless laughter as she became unable to maintain the attitude.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it, Lois," Clark assured her. "I'm sure I'll be the one supporting my wonderfully-talented reporter-woman next time!"

"Maybe," she agreed.

He was silent for a moment, then said thoughtfully, looking at his award plaque, "It's smaller than I thought."

"And not quite as shiny close up," Lois agreed. "You know, you win a few of these, you find out they don't mean as much. A quick rush, a few pats on the back, then you're back on the beat, only as good as your next story."

Clark raised an eyebrow sceptically at her, but didn't comment. "Well, where do you think I should keep it?" he asked, realising suddenly that in all the times he'd been in Lois's apartment he had never actually seen her awards.

"I'm the wrong person to ask," she replied with a shrug. "I...." She hesitated suddenly before continuing, "I tell people I keep mine in the bottom of a closet."

The significance of Lois's remark didn't escape Clark. "You tell people... so where do you keep them?"

Lois looked embarrassed momentarily, then murmured, "I'll show you when we get back to my place."

"I'll look forward to that," Clark assured her. He had very much enjoyed the evening, he reflected as they walked. It had nothing to do with the fact that he'd actually won an award, although naturally he was delighted about that. It vindicated his decision to move to Metropolis to work as a reporter, his conviction that it was a career in which he could succeed and use his writing talents to make a difference. No, what had made the evening special was that he'd been with Lois. It hadn't been a date in the conventional sense, simply two people who had decided to go to the ceremony together: she had initially asked him to escort her before the nominations had been released, fully anticipating that she would be nominated again as in previous years. No, it hadn't been a date, but they had been together. And it felt good to be with Lois like this.

He was by now very sure that she hadn't worked out his secret identity; if she had, he felt sure that she would have said something by now. He knew Lois too well to expect that she would keep quiet about something as big as this. He was relieved, because he somehow felt that the time was not yet right to tell her. There would be a time when she would need to know, of that Clark was now sure; and he now felt that he actually wanted her to know. He hated having to make excuses to her, to dash off without explanation, or having to tell her something with the preface, 'Superman told me.'

Once back at her apartment, Lois made coffee and, as she handed him a cup, Clark asked "So what do you do with your awards, then?"

She looked a little sheepish again before leading the way to the large cabinet in her living-room. Unlocking the top section, she removed a row of books to reveal a concealed glass shelf which lit as she pressed a switch. Clark gasped in admiration at her three highly-polished awards which sat, gleaming, on the shelf.

"I like the lighting," he commented at last, an amused smile hovering around his lips. "It makes them look... bigger."

She turned to look at him, her expression wary. "You don't think I'm being... big-headed to keep them here like this?"

Clark stared at her in amazement. "Why on earth would I think that? You're an incredibly talented reporter, and you've won three of the top awards for journalists in Metropolis - and you're still only twenty-seven. Of course you should be proud of your achievements!"

Lois shrugged helplessly. "I guess I try to be blase about it all - I am proud of what I've done, and I like to be respected for it, but I don't want to be a show-off."

"Don't undersell yourself, Lois," Clark told her, his voice sincere. "You are a great reporter, and you know Perry and the Planet are proud of you. I know you sort of lost confidence in yourself a little immediately after... Luthor, but you really have no need to worry."

You're still the best."

She closed up her display cabinet again before turning back to him. "That's really sweet of you, Clark."

"Hey, I meant it!" he assured her, his voice husky.

"Thanks," she murmured, a tiny choke in her voice.

"Lois, you know, I meant it as well when I said you looked beautiful tonight," Clark said huskily after a moment. "That dress is just... stunning, and I really like the way you've done your hair."

She glanced up at him and caught the intensity in his gaze as he watched her. His eyes told her, every bit as sincerely as his words had, that he meant what he'd said. She held his gaze. "You look pretty stunning yourself, Clark. I've always loved the way men look in tuxedos, but you really look great in that."

"We made a great couple," he replied, then hesitated, as if wondering whether he should have said that.

"Yes, we did," Lois agreed, and he smiled warmly in response.

After a moment, he broke the silence, which had been growing a little tense. "Lois, I need to get going - my parents are arriving early tomorrow, you know."

"Oh - okay." Lois, to her surprise, felt disappointment at Clark's early departure. She wasn't sure just what she had hoped for; after all, they both knew where they stood as far as their relationship was concerned. But even so, she hadn't wanted to be deprived of Clark's company just yet.

"You call me if you need anything, okay?" he insisted as she walked him to the door. "Any bad dreams or anything like that, and I'll come straight over."

"Thanks, Clark," she murmured, giving him a grateful smile. "Hey - I enjoyed this evening, you know. Thanks for inviting me to be your date."

"Hey, that was definitely my pleasure, Lois!" he assured her. "But you're right, it was wonderful. You know, maybe... well, I know what we decided about our relationship, and that's fine, but maybe we could go out for dinner sometime? I don't mean just takeout, or a trip to the local pizza parlour - I mean somewhere special."

< Like a proper date> Lois realised, at once recognising that the idea appealed to her as well. "I'd like that, Clark," she admitted, her voice husky.

He smiled down at her, his eyes glowing with his delight at her acceptance, and almost without volition she found herself reaching up to him. Her hand slid around the back of his neck, drawing his head down to hers, and he came willingly. Their lips met, and as the kiss deepened Clark's arms came around Lois and drew her body closer to his. She wrapped her other arm around his waist, luxuriating in the sensation of his strong, muscular body pressed against hers.

They shared several kisses, which were at once passionate, loving and shattering in their intensity; finally Lois had to come up for air and she withdrew her lips from his for a brief moment. As before, reality seemed to hit Clark at that moment, and he also drew back, his arms falling from around her. She stepped back, unsure of herself or of where she stood.

"Lois... oh God, that was.... we shouldn't have done that," he stammered huskily, his brown eyes looking troubled.

"Clark... I know that's what we said yesterday morning, but that was incredible!" Lois protested, staring up at him, her lipstick smudged, making it apparent that she'd just been thoroughly kissed.

"Yeah, it was," he agreed. "But, Lois... oh, you know how I feel about you, so you know I can't deny I enjoyed that and that I'd love to do it again. But... you have to be honest with me and with yourself. Can you look me in the eye and say there isn't anyone else you think of doing that with?"

Lois stared at Clark briefly before lowering her gaze as an image of Superman flashed before her eyes. Yes, if Superman flew in right now and wanted to sweep her off her feet, she would go. And that wasn't fair to Clark.

"I'm sorry, Clark," she told him, her tone miserable. "I love you too, but... not enough to commit exclusively to you. And I won't offer you any less."

"I wouldn't accept any less," he replied harshly, before adding, "It's okay, Lois, I knew the score." He trailed his index finger lightly down her cheek before continuing, "Don't worry about it. You're still my best friend, and that's enough - for now."

\*\*\*\*\* < Why can't I just settle for what I can have?>  
Clark asked himself incredulously as he flew home. < She obviously feels something for me - she's clearly attracted to me. Why did I have to make such a fuss about being her first choice?>

Because you don't want to be her second choice, the man she's prepared just to settle for, his inner voice reminded him. You want her to be with \*you\* because you're the one she wants. You want her to love you the way you love her - like you're the only man who could ever mean anything to her.

< But she could grow to love me like that> he protested to himself. < Give her time....>

And time could prove that her attraction to him was ephemeral, just a rebound thing, his conscience reminded him. After all, Lois had taken finding out Luthor's true nature very badly. She had been going to marry the man, so it was hardly surprising if she was still hung up on him. She might say she hated him, his conscience argued, but it was well known that there was a very thin line between love and hate. Lois's feelings for her ex-fiance were clearly still unresolved.

And as long as Lex Luthor was in her thoughts, Clark didn't want their relationship to progress further. The last thing he wanted was

to be compared with the only man he had ever thought of as his enemy; the only person whose death he had actually welcomed.

It was obvious that Lois was not over the collapse of her engagement, despite her assertion that she herself had stopped the wedding. Her ex-fiance regularly appeared in her nightmares, and no matter how frightening those dreams were, it was still a sign that Luthor was still very much in her mind. And she even continued to call him Lex - surely an indication that her feelings for him were less negative than she had insisted to Clark.

No, as long as she had mixed feelings about Luthor, his relationship with Lois would remain 'undefined.'

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After Clark had left, Lois padded silently, thoughtfully, into the bedroom to remove her dress and make-up. She felt even more mixed up than she had the previous morning, when she and Clark had also kissed unintentionally. They were beginning to make something of a habit of that....

And what was wrong with that? she asked herself. Nothing... except that Clark was unhappy about it. And he had a perfect right to be, she admitted. While she would have no hesitation at all in saying that she found Clark attractive, that she would be happy to go out on a date with him - and even that if he started dating someone else, like that new assistant DA they'd met briefly a couple of days ago who had clearly found Clark attractive, she would be jealous, none of that meant that she was in love with Clark. And he deserved no less than that.

But what did she feel for him? She tried to review her emotions where Clark was concerned. She found him extremely attractive... she found herself feeling warm as she remembered exactly \*how\* attracted she had felt to him when they'd been kissing. She cared about him more than she had about any other man she'd ever met. He was an essential part of her life, and if for some reason she ever lost him she would be... lost without him. He was her best friend... and more. Yes, definitely more. If she had to define how she felt about him - yes, there was just one word for her feelings. She loved Clark.

But, as she'd admitted to him before he'd left, she didn't love him the way he loved her. < What's the difference? > she screamed silently to herself, but her conscience gave her the answer immediately. If she really loved Clark, the way he loved her, the way she should love someone like him, she wouldn't be remotely interested in anyone else. She would want to be with him, and him alone.

But she loved Superman, and the more her brain tried to convince herself that she didn't, the more her heart convinced herself that she did. There was so much about Superman to love: his innate goodness, his honesty, his decency, and his heroic activities, as well as the way his presence always made her feel, the way her heart leaped every time she saw him. Of course, she reflected thoughtfully, Superman and Clark had a lot in common. Clark was also a thoroughly decent man, and with a strong streak of honesty and moral standards - although she had corrupted him to some degree, she reflected in amusement, remembering her glee the first time Clark had 'borrowed' a piece of evidence when they'd been investigating a story. Clark also

had a wonderful sense of humour: although his bad jokes often made her groan, he had a well-developed sense of the ridiculous, an ability to laugh at himself and a talent for making her laugh.

Two men... so similar in so many ways, and different in others - Superman was usually very sober and serious, though he very occasionally lightened up when he was alone with her. Two men, each with the power to evoke very strong feelings within her. Two men, each with the ability to make her love them.

Was it possible to be in love with two men at the same time? Lois wondered with a growing sense of shock.

\*Was\* she in love with two men at the same time? She paused, considering the evidence. She knew she loved Superman. But her feelings for Clark were growing stronger all the time, which seemed to suggest that she was falling in love with him as well. But how could she be falling in love with him when she was already in love with someone else?

She decided to test herself. Could she give up Superman for Clark? The answer, so far, each time Clark had asked her whether she could honestly say she had no yearnings for anyone else, had been 'no'. But... could she give up Clark for Superman? Supposing, in the unlikely event that Superman changed his mind about her, he were to ask her to commit to him exclusively, to give up Clark. Could she do that?

She held her breath as she realised that the answer was... no.

But where did that leave her... and Clark?

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"So how's Lois doing now, Clark?"

Clark stilled a little at his father's question; he still felt warm inside every time he remembered that kiss when he and Lois had been saying goodnight last night. But he made himself smile casually. They were in his apartment; he had just travelled back by cab with his parents from the airport, as they'd declined the offer of transport from Smallville via Superman Express. "Oh, she's much better now. I finally did get her to talk, and it seemed to help. She's almost back to normal now - and as far as work's concerned, she's very much on form."

"She is? And yet you were the one who won the award last night, honey," Martha pointed out teasingly. "You said Lois wasn't even nominated."

"True," Clark agreed. "But I think she should have been."

"Did you two have a good time?" Martha enquired, with a sly expression Clark recognised of old. His mother was angling for information, and he had no intention of giving her any.

He simply shrugged and gave her an easy smile. "Yeah, it was great. It's the first time I've been to a ceremony like that, and it was very exciting waiting to see who'd won in each category. The Daily Planet had a table for all of its nominees and guests, so it was



great to be there with people from work. And everyone was really kind when I won." He paused, remembering. "Perry was great - he told me he was really proud of me."

"And so he should be!" Martha insisted with the ferocity typical of a mother defending her cub. "You're an incredibly talented writer, Clark, we always knew that about you. Right from grade school when you used to scribble those cute little stories... oh, I used to love finding those and reading them when you were out."

"Mom!" Clark protested, half-flattered but also appalled to discover that his mother had read his childish scribbles. He shrugged; he could hardly go back and stop her! He ran his hand through his hair suddenly before speaking again, more slowly and thoughtfully this time. "You know, I think the reason I'm so glad I'm succeeding as a writer is that this is something my powers can't help me with. It's all \*me,\* Clark Kent - not Superman. Okay, I get Superman exclusives easily because he's me, but I don't take all of those myself anyway. A lot of my work has nothing to do with Superman, and even when I use my powers on investigative stuff, that's only part of the job. I know I can write well. That's a talent I have which has absolutely nothing to do with being from Krypton, so when I do well at it I don't have to feel guilty about my powers making it easy for me."

Martha and Jonathan exchanged glances. They were familiar with Clark's occasional tendency to obsess about being 'different,' and his guilt about the powers which made some things easy for him. He was used to hiding his powers, since he had started to develop them around the age of ten, and there had been many times, as he'd been growing up, when he had become depressed about his uniqueness. They could understand his pleasure at succeeding in something where his powers were marginal and what mattered was his own talent and hard work. And he did work very hard at his job, which was amazing considering that in effect he held down two jobs, moonlighting as a Superhero. They still found it hard to imagine how he could get away with dashing off all the time when Superman was needed, but if it worked for him, who were they to question...?

"So, what do you guys want to do today?" Clark interrupted his parents' silent communication.

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She was in bed with Clark. They were kissing, his lips devouring hers, his tongue dancing with hers as the delicious sensations his touch was generating overpowered her. How could she not have \*known\* how sexy, how attractive her partner was? Why had she wasted so much time?

She moaned, moving closer to him, her hands reaching towards him. This time she would not let him go. This time, she would do what it took to keep him with her. She needed him, wanted him... and she would make sure that he understood that. She knew he wanted her.

She reached out and buried her hands in his thick dark hair, her eyes opening briefly to take in his handsome features. But his face swam before her eyes, and suddenly she was looking at... not Clark, but...

... Superman. She was kissing Superman.

Lois awakened with a shock, her eyes opening wide, her heart beating at an increased rate. How had that happened? How, in her dream, had Clark turned into Superman?

She really was in love with the two of them. What the heck was she going to do about that? Even if she tried, really made a determined effort to put Superman out of her mind and concentrate on Clark, she couldn't guarantee that she would succeed. If this dream was anything to go by, there was every chance that in some moment of passion her brain would cease to function and she'd call out Superman's name instead.

She couldn't risk that.

And yet, otherwise, everything seemed to be so perfect. Clark was everything she could have wanted in a man. And he had helped her, finally, to recover from her fears and insecurities after Lex. She hadn't had a nightmare since the night she'd slept over at his apartment, three days ago now. Any time the thought of Lex surfaced in her mind, the image was immediately blotted out by thoughts of Clark; even the revolting memories, such as the feel of Lex's mouth on hers, had been superseded by Clark's kisses. And yet he'd told her didn't want to be used as a way of forgetting what had happened with Lex, the limited physical intimacies she had permitted her ex-fiance.

Except that she hadn't kissed Clark as a means of wiping out the memory of Lex's embraces. She had kissed Clark because she'd wanted to. That made a difference, surely?

Not to Clark, evidently. He had asked her, outright, whether she could look him in the eye and say that he was the only man she wanted to be with. She hadn't been able to do that.

Clark deserved better than she was currently giving him, she acknowledged wryly as she padded into the shower. She needed to do a lot of thinking. Actually, she'd been doing a lot of thinking anyway over the past few days, since Clark's parents were visiting and he'd been spending most of his free time with them. Things had been busy at work as well, with the Viologic story, and they'd had very little time alone together. Jonathan Kent also seemed to be upset about something, and Clark was doing his best to give his parents his full attention, which meant that he was spending less time in the newsroom than usual. She missed him. She also missed being able to spend the evening with him, whether at her place or his, or being able to call him late at night. It didn't seem right, somehow, while his parents were there. They certainly couldn't have the kind of intimate, crazy conversations they had become accustomed to, talking about anything under the sun, with his parents potentially listening in to his side of the conversation.

Yes, she missed Clark, very much. Perhaps she should tell him so when she got a chance, she reflected.

Lois suspected that Martha Kent might have guessed that something had changed between her son and his partner, but if she had, she was saying nothing. Clark certainly hadn't mentioned anything his mother might have said, but Lois had noticed something in Martha's

expression once or twice as she had looked at the two of them. Lois just hoped Martha didn't think Lois was being unfair to Clark, taking advantage of his feelings for her.

Even if Clark's parents hadn't been visiting, the Viologic story would have meant that she and Clark wouldn't have had much opportunity to talk about their relationship, or to go for that meal he had suggested. The story had broken two days earlier when, the morning after a ferris wheel had gone wrong, Stuart Hofferma had approached Lois with the claim that the company had deliberately supplied faulty switches. The Daily Planet's story had created a major scandal, and things had become very serious the previous evening when Lois and Stuart had almost been killed. Stuart was now in hiding, staying with Clark - yet another reason why they could see little of each other. The Kents had agreed with alacrity to take on the task of guarding him.

And as a result of the investigation, Lois had seen Superman again: he had saved her and Stuart from a watery grave when they'd been shut into barrels and thrown into the Hobbs River. As usual, he hadn't stayed around long, but even the brief contact had been enough to make Lois's heart beat faster; the concern in his eyes as he'd pulled her out of the barrel had made her want to throw herself into his arms. How could she just stop loving him? Even for Clark... it just wasn't possible. But she couldn't stop loving Clark for Superman, either.

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The events of that day turned out to be among the most difficult Lois had ever faced as a journalist. She and Perry were leaving the Planet in the early afternoon when they came face to face with Sheldon Bender - it would have to be him, she thought with a grimace; he always did seem to end up working for murky characters - who served her with a libel writ. Not just any libel writ; Viologic was suing the Planet for twenty million dollars.

Perry was emphatic. Lois would have to bring in her source. She refused, reminding him about the shield law, but he pointed out that the courts kept throwing out the shield law these days. The Planet, he insisted, could not afford a twenty-million dollar lawsuit. Lois would have to bring in her source. She continued to refuse, angry at Perry's failure to back her up. What was wrong with him? Journalists were supposed to protect their sources - how would they be able to write without fear or prejudice otherwise? Why would anyone 'blow the whistle' to the press if they knew their involvement would become public? And apart from the principle of the thing, Stuart would be furious. She had given him her word; he would never forgive her if she let him down. She would never forgive \*herself\* if she had to let him down. And how could she ever expect anyone else to pass her information in the future if she couldn't guarantee them confidentiality?

When Clark finally appeared back at the Planet, Lois took him into the conference room and told him what had happened, together with a long rant on the failure of the paper's lawyers to stand up for what was right. He was sympathetic, but to her disappointment he agreed with Perry that she would have to bring Stuart in to support her story. Reluctantly, she went with Clark to his apartment to collect Stuart, Lois complaining all the way. Clark, while being

understanding of Lois's perspective, argued that she had to be reasonable about the situation.

"What choice does Perry have?" he pointed out as they entered his apartment. Then all hell broke loose as they discovered his parents in a drugged stupor, and in Clark's bedroom the evidence of a brutal killing... but no body.

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Down at the police precinct later, Clark found himself trying to comfort Lois and defend her and his parents from accusations of stupidity and interference at the same time. The detectives who had been assigned to the case were scathing in their condemnation of reporters who got involved in what should be police business; once Hofferman's life had been threatened, they argued, he should have gone to the police. Lane and Kent should have gone to the police.

In vain, Lois protested that the issue of the defective switches \*was\* being investigated, but that Stuart had refused to go to the police because he felt that his job was on the line. After the first attempt on his life, he had grudgingly agreed to go into hiding, but had again insisted on no police involvement. Lois and the Kents had done the best they could for him. It was no substitute for police protection, she was told abruptly.

Jonathan and Martha were also very shaken up: after all, they had been looking after Stuart at the time and they had, in fact, been eating dinner with him when the drug in the pizza had taken effect and knocked them out. They had been devastated to discover that their charge had been killed and his body removed while they had been unconscious. While they'd waited for the police to arrive, Clark had done his best to comfort them, and had also insisted that once they were all free to leave the precinct, his parents should go to a hotel for what was left of the night. They had little choice: after all, his apartment was a crime scene. The forensic officers would probably be there most of the night.

He was worried about Lois, though. She'd barely said a word to any of them after finding the horrific scene in his bedroom: the blood on the sheets, the signs of a struggle. She'd gone deathly pale, though, and he knew that she was holding herself responsible. He wanted to take her home now and just hold her, but the investigating officers didn't seem to be planning on letting them go any time soon. All he could do, he knew, was to stay with her and give her what comfort he could, through encouraging glances, little reassuring touches and interventions on her behalf.

He had also been the one to call Perry; he'd done it from his apartment while Martha was making everyone hot drinks. Perry had also been shocked and very concerned; he had suggested coming over, but Clark had thought his presence wasn't really necessary. There were enough of them there already, and he wasn't sure whether Lois would find the presence of her boss - who had been the one to order her to bring in her source - comforting or a rebuke.

When the police finally declared that they were free to go, Clark put his parents into a taxi before walking swiftly back to Lois. She was standing alone, unmoving, looking lost and vulnerable where he'd left

her on the steps of the precinct.

"Lois? Come on, it's time to go home."

"Clark? She turned to him, her expression unsteady. "I thought you'd gone - with your parents."

"No. I want to see you get home safely," he told her, taking her arm. "Come on, you can't stay here all night. Where are your car keys?"

"Oh...." She reached into her coat pockets and brought out the keys, then looked at them as if she wasn't sure what they were.

"Give them to me," he instructed gently, holding out his hand to her. She handed the keys over silently, and his heart turned over at the naked despair in her expression. "Come on, Lois," he murmured softly, quickly wrapping his arm around her shoulders and leading her towards the Jeep. "Let me take you home."

At her building, he guided her into her apartment, but she simply stood in the middle of the living-room, staring unseeingly around her. Clark went to her and took her by the shoulders, shaking her lightly. "Lois? Come on, talk to me."

She raised her gaze to his after a few moments. "Clark, he's dead. Stuart was killed, and it's my fault!"

"Lois, it's *\*not\** your fault!" Clark insisted immediately. "It's the fault of whoever at Viologic wanted to stop him from speaking out. Lois, you did your best to protect him, never doubt that."

She gazed at him silently for a minute or two, and Clark continued to look at her steadily, willing her to listen to him. Eventually, she sighed heavily.

"I guess you're right, Clark. It's just... well, this whole thing - it was a *\*story\**! And I was so glad to get it, so happy when it jumped right into my lap, because it was a chance to prove I was still the best there is. And - oh, I feel horrible now - I was actually glad you were taking time off to spend with your parents when Stuart first contacted me, because it meant I got the headline solo. A man is dead, Clark - all because I just can't stop being competitive!"

To his dismay, a tear appeared and rolled down her cheek. With a low groan he pulled her into his arms, cradling her against him as he murmured comforting noises to her. She clung to him, wrapping her arms around his waist and choking out her horror in gulping sobs.

"Come on, sweetheart, take it easy," Clark murmured at last, easing her away from him and finding his handkerchief so that he could dab at her tears.

"Thanks," she muttered, allowing him to dry her eyes. His endearment seemed to register with her suddenly, and she stared at him.

"Sweetheart?"

He blushed, to Lois's evident amazement. "I... sorry, Lois, it just

slipped out."

"I liked it," she whispered. She raised her face to his, almost like a child asking to be kissed, but Clark put her from him gently. He loved her so much - but now wasn't the time to take advantage of her, even if she was asking him to.

"Come on, you need to go to bed," he urged her matter-of-factly, steering her towards the bedroom door.

At the door, he turned to face her again. "Will you be okay now? I'll come and get you in the morning - we can go in to work together."

"Clark?" She had raised her pale face to his. "Where will you go? I mean, you can't go home...?"

He shrugged. "I'll be okay." He would simply go flying, he thought, or if he wanted a couple of hours' sleep, he would go to Smallville.

Her expression was hesitant, almost pleading. "You can stay here."

He gave her a wry look. "Not really, Lois - those couches of yours aren't really any good for sleeping on." He caught the intent in her expression. "No, Lois - after the last time I don't think it's a good idea if we..." He gestured towards her bed, visible through the open doorway.

Her eyes downcast, she muttered, "Okay."

"Hey." His whisper caught her attention, and she glanced quickly up at him. He slipped his hand under her jaw and tilted her face up a little. "Come on, Lois, you'll be fine. You're the strongest person I know. Get a good night's sleep, and we'll work things out together tomorrow."

"Yeah," she agreed, a little more determination in her voice. "Clark... thank you." He was nodding, about to say goodnight, when she spoke again. "I love you, Clark."

His heart leapt suddenly, but then he realised that she no doubt meant that she loved him as a friend. "Yeah, I know," he replied softly, trying not to give any hint of the pain he felt at her words. "I love you too." He curved his hand around her face and into her hair, dipping his head to kiss her cheek briefly. "Goodnight, Lois."

He let himself out of her apartment in silence, the four simple words she'd spoken to him echoing mockingly over and over in his head.

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What would she do without Clark? Lois thought tiredly as she prepared for bed. In fact, how had she managed before he came into her life? He was so thoughtful, and he always seemed to know when she needed his comfort.

At least, she remembered, \*now\* he did. There had been times in the past when... but then, she reflected, he'd been in love with her, and men in love don't always think straight. He'd seen her spending time with Lex and had been jealous, so he'd been harsh and critical when she'd needed him to be understanding and to listen to her concerns. Now they seemed to have that sorted out, and Clark's feelings for her were out in the open, their friendship had moved onto a different level.

It felt \*good\* to know that she was loved, and by such a great guy too. Lois had almost stopped feeling guilty about Clark's feelings for her, since she was now almost certain that he was the perfect man for her. All she had to resolve were her feelings for Superman; but she had just about succeeded in convincing herself that, however real her feelings might be, she was foolish to continue harbouring them. She needed to put Superman out of her mind, except as a friend, and concentrate on Clark.

She'd told Clark she loved him, just before he'd left, Lois remembered suddenly as she brushed her teeth. That hadn't been intentional... but it had been a good thing to say. Suddenly she was sure of that. She \*did\* love him, and maybe it was time to tell him that she was now sure of her feelings for him, that she was ready to commit to him in the way he wanted. They could talk about it once Stuart's murder was solved, she thought blearily, making her way to bed.

She and Clark... a couple. The image made her smile, and she fell asleep feeling his presence in her mind as strongly as if he was physically with her, his arms wrapped securely around her and his lips against her hair.

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Clark thought Lois seemed to be a little more cheerful when he called for her the following morning, apparently determined to put on a brave face to the world and get on with finding Stuart Hoffer's killers. As they exited the elevator and walked into the newsroom, however, Clark caught sight of a copy of the Metropolis Star on someone's desk, the headline clearly visible. 'Viologic Source Murdered - Planet Reporter Linked.'

He grimaced, and took a surreptitious glance around him. No-one appeared to be looking. At Super-speed he darted out his hand towards the newspaper and turned it over, so that the headline was no longer obvious. Narrow escape, he thought. Lois certainly did not need to see \*that\* this morning!

However, a few minutes later when he brought her coffee across he realised that his efforts had been a waste of time. She was sitting at her desk, her complexion pale again as she read a copy of the Star. She raised her gaze to him as he approached.

"This editorial - " she waved the paper at him, "it talks about how reporters have a lot of power, and that we have a responsibility not to abuse it. They're saying \*I\* abused my position, Clark, and as a result someone's dead." Her expression creased, and she seemed about to cry again. "Clark, I wrote an article that got a man killed!" she ground out.

In an instant he was standing beside her, his hand on her shoulder. "Lois, it *\*wasn't\** your fault. You used every possible means to protect the man's identity. No-one could have done more than you did. You might as well blame my parents for ordering pizza - it's crazy to feel guilty. Feel sorry that he's dead, but it isn't your fault," he finished in an intense tone, willing her to listen.

"No, it's my fault. I always want to be first with the story, prove I'm one better than anyone else...." she whimpered. "And now look where it's got me."

"*\*Us,\** Lois," he pointed out. "We're a team, right? And we will be first with the story - first to prove that Eric Thorpe of Viologic or someone acting on his instructions killed Stuart. Okay?"

Lois was nodding, but suddenly Perry was calling her. The expression on the editor's face made her blanch again, and she got to her feet. "Perry wants to see me, Clark."

Sighing heavily, Clark returned to his own desk. He was desperately worried about Lois. She had only just recovered from her crisis of confidence over the Lex affair, and now this. If she couldn't stop trying to convince herself that she alone was responsible for Hofferma's death, she would never get her nerve back.

It wasn't that Clark didn't care that a man was dead; far from it. He was deeply, coldly angry and was determined to do everything in his Super power to ensure that Stuart Hofferma's killers were caught. But his first concern was Lois. He hated seeing her like this, looking as if she was ready to give up.

He glanced over warily towards the Editor-in-Chief's office; he hadn't been at all happy about the expression on Perry's face and he was desperately hoping that the Planet was not about to let Lois down. He began to tune in on their conversation, excusing his eavesdropping with the argument that he needed to be sure that Lois was okay.

Perry was explaining that he'd just returned from a meeting with the Planet's published and lawyers. This didn't sound good, Clark thought. Then Perry's next words shook him to the core.

"I'm going to have to suspend you," the editor said slowly.

Clark heard Lois gasp. "Perry - "

"I've just spent the last two hours fighting the six-headed monster and lost," Perry replied grimly. Clark heard Lois protesting again, suggesting that Perry could surely have simply transferred her to another department in the meantime, until the threat of lawsuit was over.

But Perry's response made grim hearing. It seemed that Stuart's death made all the difference: had Lois been able to produce her source, Perry might have been able to get away with a transfer. But it seemed the legal department wasn't prepared to take the risk.

Clark leapt to his feet and burst into Perry's office. "Chief, you can't do this!" he protested, as Lois swung round to stare at him in shock.



"Clark, son, I have no choice," the editor replied, before turning back to Lois. "Lois, I'm sorry, and I'll do all in my power to see that you get reinstated ASAP."

The interview was clearly over; Clark ushered a white-faced Lois back out into the newsroom, though he couldn't resist a disbelieving glance back at their editor as he did so. As the door closed behind them, his Super-hearing picked up a whispered remark which made him regret his anger against Perry.

"Sometimes I hate this job," Clark heard the editor whisper bitterly.

< Yeah, you're not the only one > Clark thought as he accompanied Lois to her desk where, still in shock, she began to pack her belongings into a carrier-bag. The expression on her face troubled him greatly. Apart from the guilt she clearly felt about the death of her source, she was in danger of falling apart professionally. What a wretched thing to happen, he thought; and especially now, when she had only just dragged herself back from her recent depression over the Lex fiasco. She had almost lost her confidence as a reporter then; it had been a pretty close call. Now... well, unless the Planet defeated the libel suit, or they proved before it came to court that Viologic was indeed responsible for the defective switches - that Lois's original story had been correct - he considered it very possible that she might never work as a journalist again.

The same thought appeared to be going through Lois's mind. As she threw her possessions into the bag, she barely spoke, except to give Clark a desperate look at one point. "My career's over, Clark! And all because...." She trailed off, and he reached out to take the bag from her.

"Come on, Lois, you don't need to do that now. You've been suspended, and I wish it hadn't happened too, but you still work here. You're still a reporter." He reached for her and gave her a brief one-armed hug. "Go on home," he told her. "I'll come over to see you as soon as I can, I promise."

He escorted her downstairs, adopting a deliberately upbeat tone to his conversation as they walked in a deliberate attempt to persuade her to snap out of her depression. It *\*wasn't\** as desperate as she was making out. They *\*would\** catch Stuart's killers, and they would prove Viologic was responsible. And she would be reinstated. It would all be over before she knew it, he assured her with more confidence than he felt.

He could have cheerfully strangled the security guard who stepped in front of them in the foyer to demand Lois's Press ID. She handed it over, muttering about it being 'the final indignity.' Clark simply tightened his arm about her shoulder.

They stood together on the pavement, neither wanting to be the one to leave first. Both knew that Clark needed to get back into the newsroom and get on with his work; both knew that Lois had to go home. They faced each other awkwardly, Clark still disjointedly telling Lois that all would be well, and Lois making incoherent attempts to respond. He was just about to yield to his impulse to take her firmly in his arms and hug her when suddenly Lois was rudely

thrust aside as one of their newsroom colleagues yelled his name.

It was Allison, one of the junior reports in the City room; it seemed Perry had told her to get him to go with her to cover a press conference. He had no choice. He threw Lois a helpless glance as Allison dragged him after her into a taxi. As the car drew away, he could see Lois still standing on the pavement, looking lost and afraid. She mouthed something after him; his Super-hearing hadn't been activated, but it looked like 'I'll miss you.'

He wanted to dive out of the taxi and run after her, but there was nothing he could do right at that moment; it would do them no good if they both got suspended. He would have to wait until he could find time to go and see her. Although.... He hesitated, thinking suddenly. Although he wanted desperately to comfort her, his own words of encouragement were not really getting through to her. But perhaps, he wondered, someone else could succeed where he was failing?

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She'd been suspended. She could still barely believe it had happened, that Perry had stood in his office and uttered those dreadful words. She, Lois Lane, the most brilliant young reporter the Planet had ever had (except that it was Clark who won the Kerth this year, her inner voice taunted her) had been suspended from her job because a story she'd written, had staked her journalistic integrity on, was the subject of a twenty-million dollar lawsuit.

< And because a man is dead because of you> her conscience added.

As if on auto-pilot, she changed out of her smart work clothes and into jeans and a sweatshirt, pulling on a loose blouse over the top since the weather was beginning to turn cold. Telling herself firmly that Lois Lane did *\*not\** sit around and mope, she then turned her attention to the problem at hand.

< Find out who killed Stuart> she resolved. If she managed to do that, to prove Viologic's involvement, the Planet would be in the clear and she wouldn't have his death on her conscience... well, not to the same extent. Digging her Rolodex out of the carrier bag, she dragged the phone over to the couch and began to make calls to her various sources.

An hour later she was almost ready to give up in frustration. Every single one of her regular sources refused to talk to her; they had all heard, of course, about what had happened to Stuart Hofferaman, and no matter how much she tried to convince them that she had done everything possible to shield him, no-one would listen. By the time the tenth person had hung up on her as soon as she'd given her name she was ready to cry.

Suddenly she heard someone speaking to her. "Looks like you could use a friend, Lois."

Her head jerked up; Superman was hovering outside the open window. She stared at him as he lightly drifted up and down, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression one of friendly concern. What was he

doing here? And why did he have to come when she was looking such a mess, she thought glumly. Dressed in her sloppiest clothes, her hair bundled back into a rough-and-ready ponytail and sitting in a mess of papers and the detritus of an unsuccessful couple of hours' work, she felt very much at a disadvantage in front of the man who meant so much to her and whom she always tried very hard to impress.

She jumped to her feet, hurrying towards the window. "Superman! It's... I didn't expect to see you. Come in!"

He stepped over the windowsill, striding into the room. "Lois, I heard about what happened," he told her, his tone sympathetic but matter-of-fact. She shrugged helplessly, unsure what to say. He regarded her thoughtfully for a moment or two before speaking.

His voice was low, his words clearly uttered with a great deal of thought behind them. "Lois, if anyone knows what it's like to be on the outside, I do. Sometimes I feel like I'm out there fighting all alone. Sometimes I feel like giving up. But then I remember that what I stand for is more important than anything else. Your work is important to the people of Metropolis. You're a brilliant, passionate journalist. Adversity has never stopped you before. Don't let it start now."

His quiet but impassioned speech warmed her; he really did care about her, and about what she tried to do in her work. It occurred to her that this was probably the longest speech Superman had ever made to her, and it was certainly the most passionate he had ever allowed himself to be about his own work. And he believed that her efforts as a reporter were on the same plane.... She felt incredibly flattered. Somehow, as well, his words managed to reach her on a level which she had not allowed Clark's caring support to penetrate. She began to accept that what had happened was not her fault, although she was still in no doubt that it was her responsibility to prove that Stuart's claims about Viologic were correct. That would be a vindication of her story and a fitting tribute to Stuart.

Something about Superman's final comment struck her suddenly, and she frowned at him. "That's funny. Clark said the same thing."

He smiled at her in return. "I guess we both know you pretty well, Lois - and I know we both care about you." Before she could reply, he gestured at the papers lying around the sofa and the floor and offered to help her clean up. Although she told him it was unnecessary, he began to move about her room so quickly she could barely even see the blur he had become.

In less than a minute, the room was spotless. The blur slowed down and coalesced into the recognisable form of Superman, holding her Rolodex in his hand. She took it, flicking through it as she thanked him for his help, then she gasped again. "You even \*alphabetised\* it!"

He grinned, but when he spoke his words were serious. "Lois, don't stop believing in yourself. I haven't."

Touched beyond words at his concern, Lois gave him a watery smile. An impulse made her take the risk of stepping closer to him; she hoped he wouldn't repulse her as she reached up to wrap her arms around his neck. He didn't, returning the embrace by taking her in his arms to

hug her back.

"Thanks for coming to see me, Superman," she whispered. "You'll never know how much you helped me."

His face was buried against her hair, and his deep voice resonated in her ear as he murmured, "You're very welcome, Lois. I had to make sure that you were okay."

She leaned back in his embrace, gazing up into the beloved features; the yearning must have been evident on her face, for he bent his head and touched his lips to hers, briefly but with gentle pressure, before releasing her and stepping back.

How could she choose between Clark and this man? Lois asked herself as Superman stepped off her windowsill and flew away. But... she did love Clark, there was no doubt about that. Superman was... was out of her reach, and anyway only cared for her as a friend. She *\*had\** to put him out of her mind, convince herself that she only wanted his friendship too.

After all, she could never have Superman. She could have Clark, though, and she now knew that her feelings for him were at least as strong as those she had for Superman.

She pushed those thoughts aside and returned to her now-tidied notes. Suspension or not, she had a murder to solve.

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Clark flew away from Lois's apartment, glad that he'd made the decision to visit her as Superman. He had suspected that the Super-hero might well be able to persuade her of her self-worth better than he could as himself. It wasn't that she wasn't listening to Clark, but he knew very well that he could only explain his own sense of being an outsider as Superman. She had seemed to take the point, and by the time he'd left she had certainly seemed calmer, more determined to fight for her reputation and position. Her heartbeat had been more normal - well, apart from the moment they'd shared that brief kiss - and her colour had improved.

That kiss... he knew he shouldn't have done it, but in the end he hadn't been able to resist the silent plea in her expression. And in the end it had been a curiously passionless, caring kiss between friends, he thought. Of course, he'd wanted much more, but that wasn't a good idea, either in the Super-hero guise or as Clark, given the confused state of Lois's emotions right now.

But that wasn't the most important issue at the moment. If he was going to help Lois, he needed to find out more about Viologic, Eric Thorpe, and Stuart Hoffer's murder. Putting on a burst of Super-speed, he headed back to the Planet.

It was several hours later when he finally felt able to leave and go to see Lois; he'd wanted to check up on her some time ago, but was torn between that and the desire to have something positive to report to her when he finally went around. He'd finally struck lucky a short time ago when he'd discovered that Thorpe was backing Daniel Hanson, the challenger for Governor; he wasn't sure whether, or how, that linked to the defective switches, but on the other hand, Thorpe's

relationship with Hanson was strangely surrounded in secrecy.

When Lois opened the door of her apartment to him, he was relieved to see that, although she looked tired, she also seemed more cheerful than she'd been earlier. He stepped inside and immediately reached for her, pulling her into his embrace.

"I wanted to do this earlier, but I didn't get a chance," he murmured softly as he wrapped his arms around her. "Are you okay, partner?"

She hugged him back gratefully. "Partner? Not at the moment," she quipped wryly.

"Hey!" he chided lightly. "We're still partners. You'll be back at the Planet very soon, trust me." Loosening his hold on her, he studied her face: she appeared to be more positive, and she'd done something with her hair so that it no longer stuck out at untidy angles. Yes, Lois was bouncing back, which was a great relief to him.

She remembered his earlier question, smiling ruefully at him. "Yeah, I'm okay, Clark. More or less, anyway. I still wish I could have done more to help Stuart, but I've stopped beating myself up over it." Pausing, she studied her best friend's face, seeing the love and concern for her clearly evident. "Superman came over," she added then, not wanting Clark to find out from the Super-hero himself and think that she was hiding things from him. "He was really kind - he said some pretty nice things, and that helped me get things into perspective a little."

"I'm glad, Lois," Clark replied softly. Changing the subject then, he filled her in on his latest findings and they spent about half an hour talking around options and possible leads.

Eventually, Lois leaned back on the couch, stretching her spine and groaning. "Oh... I've been sitting too long in the same position. My neck aches."

In an instant, Clark was standing behind her. "Let me - Mom taught me how to do neck rubs a few years ago." Without waiting for her permission, he began to massage her, finding the taut muscles with his fingertips and working them looser.

She leaned back against him as she began to feel the benefit of his ministrations. "Tell Martha she did a great job, Clark. That feels wonderful!"

He grinned from his vantage point behind her, wondering what she would think if she knew that he had used an added special ingredient which his mother would not have been able to replicate. A dash of heat vision, judiciously applied, had been very useful in helping to relax the tension his fingers had found.

But he had another idea which he thought could be even better for her. "Where's your coat, Lois? We're going for a walk - some fresh air will do you good."

She turned around, giving him a surprised glance. "A walk? Now?"

"Why not? Look, there's nothing more we can do right now. And you need a break, and I'd like to spend some time with you if you'd like that too," he persuaded.

Getting to her feet, Lois gave him a grateful smile. "I'd love it, Clark, but shouldn't you be with your parents?"

He shook his head. "Uh-huh. They know what happened, and they said I should be with you, that you probably needed me more than they did right now." He grinned suddenly, backing away as if from an imaginary attack. "Course, I told them Lois Lane never needs anyone, and that you'd only let me stick around if I was very lucky or you were feeling sorry for me. And I guess you might feel sorry for me - I think my folks only sent me over here to get rid of me so they could be on their own for a couple of hours...." He trailed off, laughing as Lois stared at him in bemusement before collapsing into giggles herself.

He was trying to take her mind off things, being the same kind friend he'd been for the past several weeks, she recognised as she pulled her coat on. It was time they had a talk, she decided....

As they strolled along the roads close to Lois's apartment, enjoying being together in the warm, dusky evening, she tucked her hand in Clark's arm. "Thanks for being there for me today, Clark. I really do appreciate it."

He turned to her with a wry smile. "I just wish I could have done more. I couldn't believe it when I heard Perry tell you he was suspending you. You know, I was almost tempted to walk right back into his office and tell him that if you were suspended then he was going to have to suspend me too! We're a team; what affects one of us affects both of us."

Lois was touched by Clark's low-voiced but passionate support. She patted his arm and smiled gratefully at him. "That's really sweet of you, Clark. But the truth is that \*I\* wrote that original Viologic story. And I guess it serves me right because I took advantage of you being with your parents so I could do it on my own - I thought it would be a great exclusive for me."

He paused, turning to face her. "Is this because I got nominated for the Kerths and you didn't?"

She blushed, grimacing. "I guess so - how small-minded can I get?"

"No." His instant response was firm. "Not at all. You're a great reporter, Lois, and you had a great exclusive drop right into your lap. What were you supposed to do?" He gave her a little shake. "You know I don't really believe you'd deliberately try to cut me out. You might think of it briefly, but you wouldn't really do it."

"Maybe. I hope not," Lois replied quietly. She fell silent for a few moments; it was time to change the subject, but now that it came to it, she felt shy. The silence between them stretched to a couple of minutes, and finally she just decided to come straight out and say it.

"Clark... last night, before you left my apartment, I said something to you, something I've never said before...." she began hesitantly.

Instantly she felt his tension, and as he turned to look at her she saw his taut jaw, the little nervous tic and the wariness in his eyes.

"Clark... are you uncomfortable with this?" she asked awkwardly, disappointed that now she'd found the courage to talk to him about her feelings he seemed disinclined to listen.

But he shook his head. "Yeah, I remember." His voice was soft, but he revealed little in the way of emotion.

"Clark... I told you that I love you, and you said you knew - but you didn't seem very interested!" Lois exclaimed, hurt.

"Oh...!" He stepped a little away from her, turning to face her. His expression was wary, almost like a puppy who was afraid of being slapped down. "I guess... well, that you meant that you love me like a friend."

Taken aback, Lois stared at him. "I do... but I think.... Oh, God, Clark, this is so hard to say! I've only told someone I love him once before, and that was... well, it didn't turn out so well."

That seemed to get a reaction. He stepped closer, wrapping one arm warmly around her shoulders. "Come on, Lois," he encouraged. "Let's walk, and talk as we go, okay? This is... well, I'm pretty nervous about all this too, so I'm sorry if I'm giving you the impression that I'm not interested in what you're saying. Believe me, I'm a bundle of nerves here," he finished on a half-laugh.

"I guess... Clark, you told me you needed me to be sure about my feelings, that you didn't want to be a substitute for anyone else. The thing is," she continued slowly, awkwardly, "my feelings for you have changed... maybe solidified over the past few weeks. I \*do\* love you - I'm \*in\* love with you. The few times we've kissed... well, it's been wonderful, and I never wanted you to stop - "

But he interrupted her, again turning to face her, his expression incredulous, barely daring to believe. "You're in love with me? Really?"

"Yeah," she whispered. Before he could say any more, she grimaced. "But I have to tell you the truth. You mean far too much to me not to be totally honest with you."

"The truth." His voice was quieter, less enthusiastic. "You're not completely over...." He trailed off, as if he found it impossible to utter the name.

She stared at him, seeing his hurt, feeling guilt for having caused it, for having raised his hopes only, it seemed, to dash them moments later. "I do love you, Clark - but I can't stop thinking of \*him\* too... it's just so weird, I'm even confusing him with you in my head now. And that's so unfair...."

"Wait a minute!" he interrupted angrily, dropping his arm abruptly

from around her shoulders. "You're confusing me with \*Luthor\*?!"

Lois stared at Clark in confusion. What did he mean...? "Lex? Clark, of course not! How could I possibly.... You have \*nothing\* in common with him! He's... he was a monster... he wasn't fit to lick your boots! I have \*never\* even thought of you in the same sentence as Lex, except to realise how different you are."

< Lex... she still calls him Lex> The thought registered painfully with Clark, making him doubt yet again whether she was as indifferent to Luthor as she claimed. But he pushed that aside and focused on the main issue. "So if it's not Luthor, just who are you confusing me with?"

Lois grimaced; she knew Clark wouldn't like this. But he'd thought she was referring to Lex, and anything had to be better than that, surely? Didn't it? She took a deep breath, preparing herself for his reaction. "It's Superman, Clark. I keep confusing.... It's so weird. I just get so many pictures in my mind of times when I was with either of you, and you just become... confused.... Like when I spent the night in your apartment and we... kissed. I dream about that, but in my dream you turn into Superman! And when you came and found me when I was ripping my wedding dress, I have the weirdest idea that you used... \*heat\* vision on me - but you couldn't have! And when Superman came to see me a couple of days after that, he hugged me - but looking back, I felt exactly the same way I do when I'm hugging you! And... Clark, I told you about my nightmare, when Lex had you in a cage, but it was made from Kryptonite. I mean, why would he trap you with Kryptonite?"

She took a shuddering sigh as she finally ran out of words and breath, then raised her gaze to Clark's. He was standing a couple of feet from her, simply staring at her incredulously. < That's it> she told herself glumly. < I've blown it - he was always jealous of my feelings for Superman. He'll never want me now...>

But Clark was beginning to speak. Haltingly, he choked out, "You \*weren't\* thinking about Luthor, then? All those times when you admitted that there was someone else on your mind, your emotions were confused - it was \*Superman,\* not Luthor?"

"Yes," Lois answered, as stunned by Clark's assumption that she had still had feelings for Lex as he appeared to be by her explanation that she was confusing him with Superman. "Clark - the Lex thing messed me up, I admit that, but I have no feelings at all for the man except to be glad he's dead. I haven't even had nightmares about him since that night I stayed with you. He's just irrelevant. I love \*you\* - but I think I'm going crazy, getting you mixed up with Superman all the time."

Having given the appearance of being frozen for several moments, suddenly Clark reacted. Taking a step towards her, he wrapped her tightly in his arms, burying his face in her glossy hair. "Lois... oh, Lois, I love you so much," he murmured thickly. Then he loosened his grasp so that he was able to gaze at her. "I think I can explain the Superman thing... can we go back to your place? We need to talk in private."

Without waiting for a response, Clark urged her to turn around and,



his arm around her shoulders again, he began to guide her back, retracing the route to her apartment. Lois went, completely baffled by his response. What had he meant by saying that he could explain her confusion over him and Superman? What was going on?

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This was it, Clark thought as they re-entered Lois's apartment. Crunch time. Now that he'd been told in no uncertain terms that he'd been wrong about the state of her feelings for Lex Luthor, it was time to be completely honest with her. He only hoped that she would be able to take the news without getting too angry - especially since it was entirely his fault that she'd been confused about her emotions.

She turned to face him immediately. "Clark, what is this about? How can you possibly explain to me how I'm in love with two men at the same time? \*I\* don't even understand it myself!"

No, well, she wouldn't, he thought with an inward grimace. He took a deep breath. "Lois... maybe you need to sit down for this."

She threw him a curious, enquiring glance, but followed his advice. As he joined her on the couch, she was still watching him but her expression had turned sceptical. "Clark, this better not be some weird psycho-babble about how I'm starting to transfer my feelings for Superman onto you or something like that! I warn you, I really don't like psychiatrists right now!"

He grinned involuntarily at the idea that he might even have thought of trying amateur psychiatry on Lois. Remembering Arianna Carlin, he mused that psychiatrists weren't his favourite people either at the moment.

"No, it's nothing like that, Lois," he assured her. "It's about Superman. I think it's time I told you some more about him."

Lois's eyes widened. "You're going to tell me about Superman? You mean you're finally going to explain just how it is you always know how to contact him? I know you're a friend of his, and I've tried to respect his privacy by not asking you much about him but, Clark, it's driven me mad sometimes that you know things about him that I don't!"

Clark grimaced; maybe this was going to be more difficult than he'd thought. As he'd walked back to the apartment with Lois, he'd had visions of trying to give her hints, hoping she would realise the truth for herself. But even though she now acknowledged that she loved \*Clark,\* even though her own subconscious had been trying to tell her that there were not two men after all, she still wasn't putting the information together.

"Lois... come on, you're a reporter," he told her wryly. "It's amazed me over the last year that you haven't managed to figure out this one. You know me - and Superman - better than anyone except my parents...." He trailed off, realising that if he pursued this line much further he would end up hurting her when she finally realised the truth. She was under enough pressure professionally at the moment without his rubbing it in that she had failed to see the secret her

best friend had been hiding.

She was still watching him, her expression completely bemused. "Clark - what are you talking about?" she asked him warily. "I'm not sure I like the sound of...."

"Come here," he instructed suddenly, getting to his feet and holding out his hand to her. She came, placing her hand in his.

"Oh, Lois!" He sighed suddenly, seizing the opportunity to lean towards her and kiss her. He was not entirely sure that she'd let him after she'd heard his explanation. She leaned into his kiss, trying to prolong the contact as she opened her mouth under his.

"Clark...?" she questioned as he drew back a moment later. But he shook his head.

"Not now," he told her. He remained silent for a moment, wanting to continue but fearing the worst. He knew his best friend pretty well; he also knew just how embarrassed she was likely to be once she realised that everything she had ever said to Superman had in reality been said to Clark.

"I love you, Lois. Don't forget that," he said seriously, his expression hinting at something momentous.

Puzzled, Lois replied, "I know that, Clark. I love you too! But what's going...." She trailed off and stared at him in complete disbelief.

Clark had decided in the end that the easiest way would probably be to \*show\* her. Gripping her hand lightly, he started to levitate them upwards, coming to a halt a couple of feet above the floor. "Lois... does it make any sense now?" he asked her anxiously.

But her expression had changed from stark fear and disbelief to raging fury. "Let me \*go,\* you...." she began, and snatched her hand away from his grasp.

At once she fell the couple of feet to the floor; Clark floated back down and caught hold of her, steadying her before she could lose her balance. "Are you okay, Lois?"

She glared at him, her expression showing clearly that she had finally made the link; she knew the truth. "Just what's going on, Kent? You're trying to tell me something, yeah? Well, you know, it might have been nicer if you'd just come out and said it, instead of pulling a stunt like that!"

"Lois... Lois, please. Let me explain," he insisted, gripping her by the shoulders. "Come and sit down. I'm sorry about that - it's just that sometimes when I'm with you I get so tongue-tied.... I love you so much and I was scared about how you'd react to this. I just didn't know how to tell you the truth."

Lois, by now recovering from the initial shock, allowed him to lead her back to the couch. She sat, gazing at the man she thought she'd known as she tried to assimilate what she had just learned about him. Strangely enough, the strongest impression in her mind as she watched

him was that of a man who was extremely nervous, waiting for her to do her worst. Not much of a Super-hero right now, she mused, and smiled involuntarily at the thought.

"Lois...?" He was staring at her, unable to understand why she was smiling. "Aren't you mad?"

She focused on Clark, dismissing her thoughts about how unlike Superman he seemed right at this moment. "Mad? Maybe. Should I be? I think it's time you explained some of this to me, buddy."

He sighed. "I know. You're right." Pausing, he took a deep breath. "Okay, here goes. I'm Clark Kent - you know that. But I'm also Superman. What I need you to understand, though, is that Superman's only a disguise. \*I'm\* really from Krypton, but I've been on Earth since I was a baby and the Kents brought me up as their son. I only started being Superman a little over a year ago."

Lois regarded him thoughtfully. She wasn't really sure herself what her attitude was to this momentous news; she suspected that she was actually trying to block out her response until she had time to think about it properly. "Okay, I get it. You designed the costume and assumed a different persona so that Clark Kent could have a normal life?"

"Yeah, though it was actually Mom who designed it," Clark nodded, pleased that she seemed to be taking it so well. "As normal as I can have given I come from another planet."

"Okay, I can understand that, Clark," she told him edgily. "I can even understand you not letting me in on the secret before now - I mean, I'm a reporter, which isn't so good, and anyway I guess you've been keeping this to yourself your whole life. And, you know, I can even understand the way you acted when I told Superman I would love him if he was an ordinary man, given that I'd rejected you just a few hours earlier. I could feel very embarrassed and guilty about that," she added, now getting angry. "But I won't, because I think what you did to me over the last few weeks was worse."

"What... I did to you...?" Clark stammered, completely bemused.

"Yeah. You kept telling me we couldn't have a relationship because I couldn't commit exclusively to you. Okay, when we talked about this outside you said something weird about thinking I still cared about Lex. But you had to know that my biggest confusion was over Superman. I even told you I still had strong feelings for him. And although I told Superman a couple of weeks ago that I didn't love him, I kind of suspected that he... you were just pretending to believe me. Because it made life easier if you did." She paused to draw breath before continuing. "So you see, you've been telling me I had to be sure of my feelings, when the only reason I was confused was that I thought I was in love with two men, and \*both\* of them were you all along! And if you'd told me that, we could have sorted out our relationship much sooner. And I wouldn't have thought I was going crazy!"

Sometimes Clark was very slow on the uptake, Lois realised in amazement as she noticed that he seemed to have a hard time following her words. For a moment or two she wondered whether he was only Super when wearing the suit, but then she remembered his floating the two

of them into the air.

He removed his glasses suddenly and ran his hands agitatedly through his hair. Watching him, she was struck by the thought that, without his glasses, he didn't look like Clark but on the other hand he didn't look a lot like Superman either. Shaking her head, she murmured, "You're going to have to tell me how you do that hair thing some time."

He seemed to pull himself together suddenly and, replacing his glasses, gave her a nervous half-smile. "Lois - I'm sorry if I was the cause of your confusion. Yeah, I do know you had a crush on Superman for a long time. And that was frustrating as hell for me, too. And I behaved inappropriately towards you sometimes as Superman, but that was... well, before we were really friends. I used to get so hurt and frustrated when you barely noticed me as Clark, and I was so much in love with you...." He halted for a moment, then seemed to gain a second wind. "I know you thought you were in love with Superman. But - well, he doesn't even exist! And, okay, you thought he did, but didn't you ever see what a one-dimensional caricature he was? How could you be really in love with someone like that?"

Lois's instinctive reaction to Clark's words was annoyance, but she recognised that losing her temper was unlikely to get them anywhere. And anyway, on reflection, Clark seemed to be seriously confused about his creation. "Clark - how can you say Superman is one-dimensional? Have you forgotten what you did for me today?"

Clark frowned. "Lois...? I just thought you might be more inclined to listen if Superman came to talk to you."

She shook her head. "You haven't a clue, do you, Clark? That was some speech you made me as Superman. And you couldn't have done that as Clark - not convincingly, not without me knowing the truth. \*Do\* you feel like you're on the outside, as Clark?"

"Sometimes," he confessed. "You know, it's little things... like I never get sick, apart from Kryptonite, and I rarely feel the cold. So there are some experiences I can never share in. And then there've been times when my Super-hearing has let me hear things I'd have been happier not hearing. And I know that if I was normal, I wouldn't be able to do that."

< If I was normal...> Lois heard the latent pain in Clark's voice as he spoke, and she thought she was beginning to understand something of his real feelings about who he was. Maybe this was why it was so hard for him to confess the truth to her - whatever her reactions to Superman had been, at least she'd always accepted Clark as a normal person. Was he afraid that he would now lose that acceptance?

And what did he mean about hearing things he'd prefer not to have heard? She grimaced suddenly as she thought of circumstances where Clark could have overheard things. School and college contemporaries talking about him in his absence, work colleagues discussing him; it would have been easy for him to overhear some unkind remark or other. A sudden thought struck her: could he have heard \*her\* saying something unpleasant about him? It was possible, she supposed. But he had to know now that she didn't mean it.

But there were still unresolved issues.... "Clark, I understand what you're saying to me about the secret identity thing, really I do," she assured him, wanting him to understand that, while she might be hurt, she wasn't going to beat him up over it. Right now, he seemed to need her support, instead of it being the other way around. "And some time soon we're going to have a long talk about all this. But for now - even if \*you\* think Superman is just a one-dimensional figment of your imagination, you have to understand that to me, and to thousands of other people, he is very real. He is kind, and caring, and decent, and he continually puts himself at the disposal of others. In fact, I really don't know where you find the time to do all that and hold down a full-time job! Clark - Superman \*is\* a real person. Do you know how differently you behave when you're being him?"

He was listening in silence now, his expression altered from the initial scepticism to a growing appearance of enlightenment. As she paused again, he reached out his hand towards her. "Lois... I never understood that, you know. Sure, I behaved differently, but I had to - I couldn't take the chance that Clark Kent might be recognised. But I didn't realise that he'd developed his own personality - that is what you're telling me, right?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," Lois agreed. "And why wouldn't I fall in love with the personality you showed me as Superman? Especially as he was always so... so nice, so caring around me. He even told me I'd always be special to him."

"You will, Lois," Clark whispered, reaching out to caress her cheek with his hand. "But you're right, I did encourage you as Superman. It was just so tempting sometimes: you responded so beautifully to him, and I could barely get through to you as me."

"Clark... you told me you loved me while I was working at LNN," Lois reminded him. "Just when were you planning on telling me about Superman?"

He grimaced. "I know, fair point. Not then, I guess - though I think if you'd given me any indication that day that you had some feelings for me, I would have told you very soon after. But you said you didn't love me the way I loved you, and then you said you wanted to talk to Superman. It was pretty clear to me what about...."

"And so you were cold to me as Superman," Lois finished. "Well, okay, I probably deserved that. But the way we've been over the past few weeks - you knew I knew that you were still in love with me. We've been best friends, and more - 'not defined,' you said. And yet you couldn't tell me that the person I thought I knew wasn't who you really are?" That hurt, she realised. She'd thought they were so close, that she knew everything there was to know about him, and vice versa. She had confided some of her most intimate secrets to him, including things about her abortive engagement. And all the time he'd been keeping this from her.

He sighed again, this time ducking his head for a moment before looking back at her. "Lois, do you remember that night you stayed at my apartment, when you had the nightmare?"

She nodded.

"I almost told you then."

"Why not?" she demanded.

When he got to his feet, Lois realised that his answer might not be something she wanted to hear. He turned to look at her, and his expression held regret and self-criticism. "Lois... I know I was probably wrong, but I thought you probably weren't ready to hear it. And - I know it sounds absolutely ridiculous, but I was jealous... of myself."

Of himself? That didn't make sense... but wait a minute, of course it did! "You thought that if I knew you were Superman I'd swear undying love there and then? You wanted me to tell Clark I loved him first?"

Hearing his precise motivations from Lois in this way made Clark realise how idiotic, how selfish he'd been. "I know," he replied wryly. "I was so stupid, wasn't I? And you'll probably tell me how badly I've misjudged you, and you'd be right. The last thing you are is shallow, Lois, and yet that's how I treated you."

He'd pre-empted her anger totally by acknowledging that, Lois realised, and she gave him a half-smile in acknowledgement. "Yeah, that sounds about right, Clark. Plus, why would you want me \*not\* to love Superman, when he's you?"

"Huh?" She'd clearly taken him by surprise with that question.

"Oh, come on, Clark! Would you want me to be like a female version of someone like Trask, who hated 'the alien'?" Lois stopped abruptly as she noticed Clark flinch at her use of the word 'alien,' and she hurriedly got to her feet. "Clark, you know I didn't mean that in a negative way! I've always known Superman's from another planet - that never bothered me." She placed her hand on his arm, and he gave her a half-smile.

"Sorry, Lois, I guess I do know you didn't mean anything by that. It's just... well, I am an alien, and most people do use that term in a derogatory way, so I... well, I have to try not to be so sensitive about it." He sighed, and covered her hand with his own. "Lois, I \*am\* sorry for prejudging you on this. If I'm honest, I've known for a long time that you're the one person I could trust with this secret, and I was getting around to telling you soon anyway. But if I'd had any idea that you thought you were in love with Superman and me at the same time, I'd have told you before now."

Lois studied her partner's face, seeing the sincerity in his expression. "I believe you, Clark," she told him.

"But do you forgive me?" he asked quickly. "I mean, for deceiving you?" He hesitated briefly before continuing. "Actually, I don't think I did anything wrong. I had to keep this thing secret. I wouldn't have a life otherwise. So I'm not apologising for pretending to you that I was two separate people. I just want to know that you understand why I had to do it." He regarded her with a more determined expression as he finished his explanation.

"You know, you really look like Superman when you look at me like

that," Lois said slowly.

"I do?" A brief grin flashed across his face. "I'll have to remember not to do that with anyone else." More seriously then, he added, "I need you to understand that, Lois. I'll apologise for anything else you think I've done wrong, but I can't lie to you about that. I had to protect my identity, and that included deceiving you."

Lois nodded. "I do understand that, Clark - I guess I just don't want to think that if I hadn't told you I was beginning to confuse you and Superman in my mind, you mightn't have told me until after we got married!"

She realised what she'd said the instant she saw the shock on Clark's face. "Umm... I mean, if our relationship got to that stage, um, hypothetically speaking, that we might have been married before you told me...."

Clark shrugged slightly. "I know what you're saying, Lois, and I promise you it wouldn't have been like that. But you know, you're taking this a lot better than I was afraid you might."

"Am I?" She raised an eyebrow at him. "I haven't decided how I feel about it yet. I - "

She broke off suddenly as she saw his head tilt to one side, and a distant expression creep over his face. She suddenly realised that she had seen Clark look like that before without ever wondering exactly what he was up to. Now that she knew, it was obvious.

"Someone needs you, right?" she asked him.

"Yeah. I'm sorry, I'll have to go," he apologised. "Look, I'll come back right after and we can finish this talk."

But she was shaking her head. "No, Clark. I need some time to think, okay? We can talk again tomorrow, when you finish work." She hardened her heart against the stricken expression on his face. "Go on, you need to be Superman."

He nodded, then stepped back several paces. Her jaw dropped then as he went into a spin and all she could see was a blur of colours. When he stopped, Superman stood in front of her.

"I \*know\* you're Clark, but this... I can't take it in," she whispered, staring at him.

He stepped towards her again. "I'll prove it," he murmured huskily. In an instant, his arms were around her and his mouth was seeking hers. His kiss was passionate and deeply loving, but too brief. As he stepped back again, he said unsteadily, "Only Clark kisses you like that, Lois."

"Yeah...." she agreed, her own voice unsteady. But he was already on his way out of her apartment, and the curtains swished violently behind him as he took off.

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Lois collapsed on the couch, her head in her hands. Superman was \*Clark\*! Of all the things she'd imagined about the Super-hero, of all her reasoning about why she was confusing the two, she'd never come up with this solution. And yet in many ways it was so obvious....!

No wonder she'd been confusing the two of them in her mind. That dream, in which she'd been kissing Clark and he'd turned into Superman - of course he had, since on that morning when she had woken up beside Clark and he'd kissed her, he hadn't been wearing his glasses. It was hardly surprising that her subconscious should have seen the truth. And as for the heat vision, that probably wasn't her imagination either. She'd been pretty much out of it when Clark had found her in her apartment that day, and she probably wouldn't have been aware of it if he'd changed into the Suit in front of her! But again, subconsciously she must have felt his use of heat vision. She knew what he'd done as well - no wonder the cuts on her hands seemed to have healed well! And her nightmare about the Kryptonite cage - if her subconscious had already somehow figured out the truth, it wasn't at all weird that, in her dream, it had been Clark in the cage.

And Clark had clearly thought she should have figured it out - he'd begun his explanation by saying that he'd wondered why someone with her reporting skills hadn't realised before now. Why hadn't she...? But she stopped that train of thought before it even had a chance to get started. How could she have known? Clark had been very clever at covering his tracks. He could move at Super-speed, so although she now realised she had never seen Clark and Superman together, he'd obviously been so quick at times that it almost seemed they were in the same place at the same time. Superman would fly off, and the very next second Clark would come strolling up, or running around the corner. Clark would disappear saying he was going to call the cops or something, and then Superman would be seen overhead, or striding over to wherever the danger was.

Was she angry? She wasn't really sure. Yes, she felt a little foolish when she allowed herself to remember some of the things she'd said to Superman. And yet... none of that seemed to bother Clark. He still loved her, and given what he'd said, he'd obviously liked being on the receiving end of at least some of her admiration.

She \*was\* annoyed that he had been in a position to stop her going through the trauma of believing that she was in love with two different men. And what had he meant by thinking that she still had feelings for Lex Luthor? In the shock of discovering Clark was Superman, she had forgotten all about that little bombshell. She would have to ask Clark about that the next time they talked.

And, after all, it was a huge relief to discover that she wasn't, after all, in love with two men. She no longer had to try to make a choice between Clark and Superman. She'd thought she had made that choice, until only that afternoon when Clark had turned up as Superman and had confused her all over again. As soon as she'd got close to him, she'd felt all the same old feelings for the Super-hero resurge again. And when he'd kissed her... just why had Clark done that, in the circumstances?

She grimaced. Simple - because she'd asked him to. She'd hugged him, then stared up at him, pleading for his kiss. And he'd probably felt sorry for her because of her suspension, wanted to make things better



for her. And anyway, now she knew Superman was really Clark, she also knew that 'Superman' had in fact been in love with her all along. What it must have cost him not to respond to her blatant hints and advances, to say nothing of that time, now highly embarrassing to remember, when she'd told him she was so completely in love with him, would love him even if he was an ordinary man with no powers at all....

Just who was Clark Kent? That was probably the more central issue right now; whether she was angry with him for deceiving her wasn't really important. Well, it was, but on the other hand, the future of their relationship was far more important. Tempting though it had been to start yelling at him once she'd realised just how thoroughly she'd been taken in, she had stopped herself from doing that. She loved him, and she wasn't about to throw away what looked like being the best relationship she'd ever had with a man over something like this. Not when he clearly did have a good reason for his deceit. Clark, in whichever guise, was the most decent, most special man she had ever met. \*That\* was more important than hurt pride any day.

Lois had been hurt by men before, sure; but although some of those men had used her or deceived her, Clark's deception hadn't been like that. He'd had nothing selfish to gain from this, apart from protecting his privacy and managing to maintain a normal life. He hadn't taken advantage of her feelings for Superman to get her into bed, for example - and yet that would have been very easy for him to do, she was aware. He'd been constant in his love and genuine affection for her. Even when she had effectively walked away from their friendship when she'd become engaged to Lex Luthor, he hadn't forgotten her; instead, he'd spent his time trying to prove Luthor's villainy in time to save her from making the biggest mistake of her life. That certainly proved the sincerity of his feelings for her. And - although she still wasn't entirely clear about the circumstances - she was convinced that Luthor had lured Clark to the Kryptonite cage by making some sort of threat against her.

Yes, Clark was special. And this revelation made no difference to her feelings for him, except that now she knew she could have both the men she loved. Though she had memories of two sets of experiences to reconcile into the person of one man, which would take some time to get used to.

But who was Clark, exactly? She had thought her partner, her best friend, her... 'not defined' almost-lover was a farmboy from Kansas. Well, in a way he still was... but that was Kansas and Krypton. The man who claimed to be short-sighted had X-ray vision, and could fly! He wasn't such an ordinary guy after all; with the powers he possessed, she was pretty sure that when he was on his own he probably took advantage of many of his abilities to make short work of routine tasks. Spending time with the real Clark Kent could be an interesting experience.

So he was a Super-hero, at the beck and call of the entire world... but he was also a pretty normal guy who had told her he was in love with her. He was also the man who had been there for her in those dreadful weeks after the wedding fiasco, the one who never gave up on her. He'd held her when she cried, cuddled her when she slept so she wouldn't be alone, listened to her for hours on end as she talked all sorts of nonsense, and at work had sheltered her from the worst of

the office gossip. Without Clark, who knew what state she would have been in? He had done it because he loved her. And he'd looked, briefly, as if all his dreams had come true when she'd said what she had about them getting married. Superman really did love her after all - but so did Clark. And Clark was who he wanted her to love in return.

He really did have a problem with recognising that Superman was also part of who he was, Lois recognised. He was very sensitive about the alien part of himself; that had been obvious. It was strange, since the Clark she had come to know so well over the past few weeks had been a confident, happy and supportive kind of guy. Yet the man in whose company she had just spent the past hour was clearly very vulnerable, and afraid of getting hurt.

That was a strange concept to grasp, Lois thought: that the strongest man alive was also possibly the most vulnerable guy she'd ever met. But was that so odd? After all, she knew Clark. Knowing that he was Superman, was his vulnerability so surprising? Her thoughts flew back suddenly to some of the disasters Superman had attended over the past year, and she reminded herself that it had been \*Clark\* dealing with what had happened there. Clark, who was so soft-hearted and whose tendency to become emotionally involved she continually criticised, though more recently she did it in a teasing manner. How did Clark cope when he was helping with the aftermath of an earthquake with dozens of dead? When people with horrific injuries needed rescuing? Who did Clark talk to after such occasions?

Jonathan and Martha, she told herself quickly. < Well, from now on he can talk to me too> she determined.

She smiled wryly as she recognised what her thoughts had just led her to see. Yes, she had forgiven Clark, and she was more than willing to take their relationship on from that point. She would still need some time to come to terms with her partner's new persona, but she loved him and he loved her... they would cope.

There were other things to cope with as well, she reminded herself suddenly. Yes, this revelation would change a lot of things about her relationship with Clark, and she was now looking forward to talking with him about where they went from this point. It would be awkward in some ways, true, but she was sure they could cope. She also needed to assure him that his secret would be as safe with her as it had always been with his parents.

But apart from her personal life, they still had an unsolved investigation - or rather, Clark did, she reminded herself, unable to prevent a small amount of bitterness creeping in. Viologic was still suing the Planet, and Stuart's murder still had to be solved.

She sat down at her small desk and booted up her laptop. Maybe if she went over all the files again, she might find something....

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She hadn't wanted him to come back. That was the only thought in Clark's mind as he flew back to his apartment some time after sorting out the three-car pile-up on the city ring road. For all her calmness when he'd told her, she was furious with him after all, and she

wasn't going to forgive him any time soon. There was no hope for them... he loved her, and he'd just lost her.

It wasn't as if he couldn't understand it, either. He'd led her to believe, for the past year, that he was two separate people. He'd allowed her to say and do things with each of his guises which she would never have done had she known they were the same men. He had used Superman to get close to her on occasion, at a stage in their relationship when she would never have allowed Clark the same freedom. He had also, a little more recently, used Superman a little in order to push her towards Clark. All in all, it was pretty deceitful.

Of course, he had a very good defence for not telling her: he'd had to keep his true identity a secret. He could not, and would not, apologise for that. He did think she'd understand that, but even though he'd been between a rock and a hard place where Lois and his secret identity was concerned - and even though she did understand - the deceit still remained. His actions, whether justifiable or not, had still hurt her.

And the hurt had been plain to see at some points during their conversation. She'd been particularly upset that he'd allowed her to continue in the belief that she loved two men. But... he swallowed suddenly, remembering that part of their conversation, what could he have done? He hadn't known that Superman was the man she was thinking of. Yet she'd been angry to discover he'd assumed she was still confused over Luthor. But why wouldn't he think that? To him, it had been a perfectly logical conclusion.

He landed silently on his balcony and quickly scanned the interior of the apartment to see whether his parents were still up. He was hoping they wouldn't be, and with that in mind he'd undertaken a lengthy patrol after dealing with the pile-up. Some time soon, possibly tomorrow, he might want to talk to his parents about what had just happened with Lois. Right now, he just wanted to be alone with his thoughts.

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It was several hours later when Clark was woken abruptly from his sleep by an insistent thumping on the front door of his apartment. Sitting up, he blinked a couple of times before using his Super-vision to see just who was disturbing the peace at - he quickly checked his watch - after four in the morning.

Lois. He shook his head wryly; why was he surprised? Though bearing in mind the way they had parted a few hours earlier, he couldn't figure what she would be doing at his place.

Getting to his feet, he began to reach for his glasses, then checked himself. What was the point? She knew who he was. And she was alone. He pulled on a T-shirt over his sleep-shorts and padded over to the door, opening it just as his parents emerged from his bedroom, rubbing their eyes and looking very puzzled.

Lois marched straight in, barely seeming to notice that the occupants of the apartment were looking bleary-eyed and none too happy about being awakened so rudely from their sleep. She instantly started speaking at about one hundred words a minute, something about having

been at her apartment thinking after she'd got the blood results from the police lab, and...

"...suddenly it just hit me," she finished exultantly.

Clark groaned silently, having been incapable of following anything his erstwhile partner had said, and not really being in the mood to wait until, in typically-dramatic Lois style, she had taken them through her entire thought process up until the eventual denouement. Yawning involuntarily, he caught her gaze. "Lois, it's past babbling hour. Could you get to the point?"

He regretted his remark almost immediately; after all, if Lois really had hit a brainwave in relation to the Viologic story, then it was important. After all, not only was her career at stake, but a man had been murdered in his own apartment. That was certainly serious enough for a small matter like being woken at four am not to be significant.

But she didn't seem upset about his intervention; she was too pleased with herself for that. Quickly, she explained that the police lab report had discovered that there had been no traces of the drug in the sample of Stuart Hofferaman's blood which had been taken from Clark's bedroom. Which seemed to imply that....

"He didn't eat any of the drugged pizza!" Clark exclaimed, suddenly seeing where this was leading.

"So..." Lois continued, "I wondered whether you'd checked your bathroom...?"

Clark looked blank for a brief second, then realised what she meant. He was about to dash off to the bedroom and from there through to his bathroom, but Lois stopped him.

"Hang on, Clark, can't you just...?" She gestured towards her eyes.

"Oh. Okay," he agreed, taken aback by this casual acceptance of his Super-identity and abilities. Obliginglly, he focused his vision on the wall, looking through into the rooms beyond it searching for Stuart's toothbrush and razor, the items he had made such a fuss about.

"Clark...?" His mother's voice interrupted his concentration. "What's going on?" she asked uncertainly, miming putting on a pair of glasses as he swung around to face her.

Clark noted his parents' dismay with faint amusement. Of course, he hadn't yet told them that Lois knew, and so they were desperately trying to prevent him giving himself away. Running one hand through his hair, he gave them a wry smile. "Sorry, Mom and Dad. I didn't get a chance to tell you that Lois knows."

"Knows what, son?" Jonathan Kent asked warily.

"That he's Superman, of course," Lois replied matter-of-factly.

"Well...." Martha trailed off and glanced uncertainly at her husband

and then her son.

Quickly, Lois added, "It's okay, Martha, I know how important this is, and I won't let the secret slip. Clark already knows that."

Anxious to correct any impression that she didn't trust Lois, Martha quickly hurried over to the younger woman, throwing her arm around Lois's shoulder. "Oh, we know that, honey! It's just that Clark hadn't told us, and it was a bit of a surprise, that's all."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," Clark added. "You guys were asleep when I got in - I was going to tell you about it in the morning." He turned back to the wall then; he could reassure his parents later, though he was pretty sure that they would accept Lois knowing the family secret without too much difficulty. He was well aware that they knew how he felt about Lois.

After a brief scan, he turned back to Lois again. "His things have gone."

"Then Stuart's not dead!" she exclaimed joyfully. "Clark, Stuart's not dead!" She flung herself into his arms enthusiastically, and he instinctively hugged her back. His emotions were in a complete whirl: only a few hours earlier Lois had given him the impression that she didn't want to speak to him, now here she was not only taking his Super-abilities for granted, but also actively embracing him. Although, he pointed out to himself with an inward grimace, she had just discovered that her source wasn't dead after all, which certainly made a difference to her position at the Planet, quite apart from removing her guilt at having inadvertently being responsible for a man's death. Clark was well aware that, however devastated Lois had been at her suspension, it was Stuart's death which had preyed on her mind more.

But now wasn't the time to worry about Lois's feelings for him. They needed to \*find\* Hoffermand, and then work on clearing the Planet before the libel action could go any further.

Lois was pulling out of Clark's arms. "Stuart's friend... Oliver? I'll bet that's where he is."

Clark agreed this was the most likely prospect, especially once Lois had managed to produce a photo of Oliver and his father, having glanced at it, took them aback by identifying him as the pizza-delivery boy. His parents, he noted, were also very relieved by this turn of events; he realised with regret that he'd been too focused on Lois's reaction to the 'murder' of Stuart Hoffermand to pay much attention to them. And yet they had also been traumatised by events: being drugged, then waking up to find themselves in the middle of a murder scene, and then having to spend hours at the police precinct being questioned. He didn't regret dividing his time between trying to solve the murder and comfort Lois; but he should perhaps have been more sensitive to his parents' needs.

"Let's go, partner," Lois urged, grabbing Clark's arm and impelling him towards the door.

He grinned instinctively at her impatience. "Hang on - let me get dressed first!" he protested, secretly glad to see the old,

go-get-'em Lois back.

She threw him an impatient glare. "Well, \*Superman,\* get dressed!"

She really was taking her new-found knowledge of his abilities in her stride, Clark thought in admiration. Well, if that was what she wanted... then that was what she would get.

He disappeared into his bedroom at Super-speed, and in just over a second he was standing in front of Lois dressed in one of his work suits. He was inordinately pleased to notice that he had managed to take the wind out of her sails with this feat; he'd been beginning to think that nothing he could do would ever surprise her again. But he supposed that from her vantage point what he'd done had been pretty amazing: disappearing and then materialising in front of her fully dressed all in the space of a blink of an eye.

"Hurry up, partner!" he teased, already striding towards the door. She followed him in silence, with what appeared to be an appreciative grin on her face.

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A couple of hours later, Clark was feeling even more impressed with the way in which Lois seemed to be adapting to her new knowledge of him. Adapting to it...? taking advantage of it, more likely, he acknowledged with a wry inward grin. He still didn't know where they stood on a personal level - apart from anything else, Lois was always very single-minded when in pursuit of a story, so even if they were already acknowledged romantic partners it would have been impossible to tell - but she was treating him with a friendly and almost possessive attitude. Maybe she hadn't been as angry as he'd thought after all?

Like right now, in fact, he mused as they exited the Jeep. They were on their way to Viologic in response to Lois's suggestion that they should break in to look for evidence. As usual, Clark had been resistant to the idea of breaking in anywhere: it was a criminal offence, apart from anything else, and he had no wish to land them both in prison, or to face Perry should he find out. But Lois had insisted, and in the Jeep on the way over she'd also made it clear that she expected him to use his powers to help them in their search.

He had grimaced at that. "Lois, Superman doesn't do breaking and entering," he had protested.

She'd thrown him a challenging grin. "But you're not being Superman right now. You're Clark - and I know very well that Clark has a very different personality from Superman. For example, \*Superman\* wouldn't lie to me and tell me he didn't love me, I know that."

Skirting close to dangerous territory there, Clark had thought, unsure whether he really wanted to get into a deep personal discussion there and then. And another reminder that, as far as she was concerned, Superman and Clark were quite distinct. That still didn't make a lot of sense to Clark, since as far as he was concerned it was just him under the Suit. But it was the second time she'd made the point. Maybe.... He thought about it for a moment. Perhaps he

should ask his parents what they thought. But... he thought again as he realised that the person who probably knew both Clark and Superman best was actually Lois. And if she said the two were different in their behaviour, then they probably were. Which would mean, he realised with a jolt, that he had actually created a three-dimensional person after all along with the disguise. < It won't \*be\* me> he had told his parents when they'd discussed whether the Suit was enough of a disguise to prevent people recognising him. Well, it looked like Superman \*wasn't\* him after all.

Lois hadn't seemed inclined to pursue the reminder of Clark's deceit either, adding immediately, with a challenging grin, that she was pretty sure that he'd been using his Super-abilities on the sly for some time on their investigations.

"Don't tell me you haven't, because I won't believe it!" she informed him.

He had grinned, unable to deny it. "Have to admit, Lois, sometimes I was amazed that you believed the excuses I gave as to why I knew things."

She'd shaken her head at that. "I always knew you were a bit weird, Clark. I decided I didn't really want to know just how weird you are!"

< Well, now you do know, I hope you're not sorry> he had thought immediately, but decided not to say anything.

And now here they were near Viologic, and she was expecting him to find the easiest way in once they'd walked the last hundred yards, having left the Jeep some distance away. Removing his glasses, since there wasn't anyone else around at before six in the morning, he scanned the building with his X-ray vision before touching her arm lightly. "This way - around the side."

He stopped her once they were standing beside the fire-escape. "You expect me to climb up that?" she demanded, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

Clark smiled, amused. Life was never boring around this woman. "Yesterday I might have done, yeah. But this morning...." He reached out and placed his hand lightly on her waist, taking her hand in his free one. "Just relax. You can hold on to me as tightly as you like, though it's really not necessary. I won't let you fall."

But she didn't seem at all alarmed as he floated them up to the tenth floor, where he'd seen a window he could get them through without having to destroy any security cameras in the process. Of course, she had flown with Superman any number of times, though Superman usually held her more securely. Given that she still had to be getting accustomed to the fact that her best friend - if he was still her best friend - had Super-powers, she was reacting extremely well, he mused. He certainly couldn't see anyone other than Lois taking this development quite as much in their stride.

But then, Lois was a pretty incredible, extraordinary woman in every way. \*She\* had come up with the idea of producing a fake Planet front page naming Oliver as accessory to faking a murderer, although she had relied on his Super-speed typing to produce the text, or a

reasonable facsimile of a story. She had also demanded that he use his Super-hearing when they'd arrived at Oliver's apartment, because she'd wanted to be sure that both Oliver and Stuart were actually there - which they had been. However, it had been mostly Lois who had put the fear of God into both men, though he had played some part in that as a result of his blazing anger that, after Lois had done everything she possibly could (including putting her career on the line) to protect Stuart, the man had dumped her in it completely by faking his own death with no thought whatsoever for her feelings.

Still, at least they had managed to get some useful information from both Stuart and Oliver as to where the documentation they were looking for might be kept. Now all they had to do was find some proof that Viologic knew those switches were defective all along. "Simple," Lois had said as she'd proposed her plan. Clark hadn't been quite so confident.

But here they were, and he was prising open the window having first short-circuited the alarm with a quick burst of heat vision. Lois had grinned at that, and instantly asked how many other such electronic devices he'd disabled while they'd been working together.

"I've got to keep some secrets!" he protested, helping her through the window before floating through himself.

Lois laughed at that. "We'll see! Now I know what to look for, you won't fool me so easily, Kent!"

Despite Lois's apparent blase attitude, she was in fact pretty amazed at her partner's abilities. Knowing he was Superman, and actually seeing him - as Clark - perform Super activities, were two very different things. That Super-speed dressing had been incredible, and as for the way he'd taken her hand and floated them up to the window... it had been very difficult not to look stunned. But she'd decided that if she and Clark were to continue as equal partners, she had to take his abilities in her stride.

It wasn't just their working relationship which had made her decide to be matter-of-fact at Clark's use of his powers. It had been very clear to her during their discussion that he was very sensitive about being 'different,' and she had known even without his having to tell her that if she treated him differently, was awkward about his Super-abilities in any way, or otherwise failed to continue behaving towards him as she always had, he could be hurt. Well, she couldn't behave as if he was the same Clark she'd always known; that would be crazy. But it had seemed to make sense that she should try to react as she was sure his parents must. They had grown up knowing that he was different, that he had special abilities. And they must by now take it in their stride, Lois felt. She could almost imagine Clark in the Kent farmhouse, cleaning up at Super-speed, painting the barn without ladders, lifting heavy equipment easily. His parents would certainly not make any kind of fuss about what he could do. So she wouldn't either.

And she'd succeeded pretty well so far, and she thought that Clark was not only surprised but also appreciative. She began to watch him more closely as they walked through the empty corridors, and to her delight she found that she was able to spot when he was doing Super things. Every so often he paused very briefly and seemed to listen;



sometimes his head would dart to one side and she suspected that he was using his telescopic vision; he would look briefly at walls or doors, and she guessed that he was X-raying into the rooms or corridors beyond.

Finally they came to the part of the building Stuart and Oliver had told them about. The wing was guarded with a highly sophisticated security system, based on recognising the iris of individuals with security clearance. Stuart, who had clearance, had refused to come with them to get them into that wing; apart from anything else, he'd insisted that since he was supposedly dead, his presence could well trigger an immediate alarm.

"How are you going to get us past this one, Flyboy?" Lois whispered as she came to a halt just by Clark's shoulder.

He turned his head to give her a quizzical glance; it still gave her a shock to see him without glasses. "Flyboy?"

She shrugged. "Seems to fit. I used to call you a farmboy, but you were never really that anyway."

"Oh, in many ways I am just a farmer's son from Kansas, Lois, trust me!" he responded with a quirky grin. "Flyboy... cute, Lois, but just don't call me that in front of anyone else, okay?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Come on, Clark! You know me better than that."

"I do," he agreed softly before turning his attention back to the security system. "Okay, I can't bypass this, but I can probably make it malfunction. That'll set off the alarm, of course, but I think I can get what we need and fly us out of here before anyone can find us."

He really was getting into the spirit of this breaking and entering stuff, Lois thought with an amused grin. "Just make sure you don't leave fingerprints anywhere, okay?"

"I don't," he replied briefly. "You probably didn't notice me wiping off the window earlier?"

A few seconds later, he'd short-circuited the alarm with his heat vision and they were in the secure wing. Clark made straight for the file cabinet Stuart had told them about, the one which should contain his report on the faulty switches.

"Got it," he whispered a moment later, holding the report using his handkerchief. "Give me that camera."

Lois handed over the miniature camera and watched as he flicked through the document as quickly as he was able, taking an exposure of every page. "I could read it at Super-speed, but then we wouldn't have any evidence," he explained as he worked. "Better to do this." Throwing the report back in its place, he thrust the camera into his pocket and strode towards Lois. "Hold on tight."

Clark took them straight out the window, pausing only very briefly to open it first, which made Lois rather nervously bury her head in his shoulder. He flew directly upwards, "to make sure no-one can see us

from the ground," he explained. After a few minutes, he touched down gently on the roof of a skyscraper, telling Lois to stand back.

A quick spin-change, and Superman stood in front of her. "Give you a ride back to the Planet, ma'am?"

"Clark - what about the Jeep?" she remembered suddenly. "We can't leave it there - I know we parked a bit away from Viologic, but it's still risky...?"

He nodded. "You're right, we'd better go back for it. Let me get us over there, okay?"

It felt more normal to be flying in Superman's arms, Lois thought, though she kept reminding herself that however he was dressed, this was Clark. She deliberately reinforced the information by calling him Clark as they flew, which he seemed to appreciate, though he quickly pointed out that it would probably be better if she called him Superman when in the Suit even if it seemed that no-one else was around.

They collected the Jeep, Clark doing another quick change in the cover of some trees first. He drove. "My reactions are quicker, Lois, and we need to get away from here as fast as possible," was his brief explanation before taking the keys from her.

As he pulled up at a junction a short while later, however, he turned to glance at her. His expression was uncertain, quite different from the confident, Superman-getting-them-out-of-trouble attitude he'd adopted a short while ago.

"Lois... you said you needed to think. Um... have you?"

His question took her by surprise. She instantly remembered telling Clark the previous evening that she would prefer it if he didn't come back as soon as he'd finished his rescue, that she needed to think. But she hadn't thought she'd said it in any negative way. Yet Clark, judging by his expression, had clearly been obsessing about it ever since. Lois grimaced; she'd certainly never intended to cause him concern.

She reached out her hand and patted his knee, which got a surprised reaction from him. "Yeah, I've thought. And we need to talk still, but we can't really do that while we're still tied up with this investigation. Let's get together later, okay?" she offered, smiling at him reassuringly.

His expression seemed to lighten a little, and he took one hand off the wheel to cover hers with it. "I'd like that, Lois. Um... I guess you might still have a few questions for me, huh?"

"I guess so," she agreed with a nod. "I'm still getting used to all this, you know? Realising all the things you can do... it's going to take some getting used to."

"Really?" he teased. "I was getting the impression that you weren't at all fazed by any of it. I was kind of wondering just what I'd have to do to impress you!"

"To impress me?" Lois enquired softly. "Clark, you do that all the

time, Superman or not. Just about everything you do or say to me these days... and you know what impressed me most about last night?"

He turned his head briefly to give her a quizzical glance, as he guided the Jeep expertly through the early-morning traffic. "What was that?"

"The way you kissed me before you left," she told him, her voice husky.

Clark took a sharp intake of breath, and as she watched him he had an arrested expression on his face. "Really?" he breathed in disbelief.

"Really."

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Still feeling as if he was floating on air, Clark guided the Jeep into a space in the Planet's parking garage. He had clearly been completely wrong about Lois's reaction to his confession. Her behaviour as they'd been driving had made that apparent; she'd seemed eager to touch him, and had hardly taken her eyes off him during the entire journey. When she'd patted his leg like that, he'd found it hard to concentrate on his driving. And when she had said what she had about the way he impressed her, and especially about his kiss... his thumping heart was still trying to assimilate that information.

Cutting the engine, he turned to face her, seeing in her own expression a softness which once upon a time would have been pretty rare where Lois was concerned. He realised in that instant that he had seen that expression a number of times over the past couple of weeks, usually when the two of them were alone together. He'd also seen it, it occurred to him, on the previous afternoon when he'd visited her as Superman. She had gazed at him with just that light in her eyes before he'd kissed her.

< Stupid, Clark> he told himself in incredulity as the explanation dawned on him. It had been obvious for a couple of weeks that Lois was as much in love with him as he was with her, but because he had been so hung up on her reaction to the Luthor affair he simply hadn't noticed. Instead, he'd ignored all the signals she'd been giving out, and had told her that she had to swear that she was completely uninterested in any other man before they could consider a relationship.

She hadn't \*kissed\* him as if she was hung up on another man! he told himself impatiently. Her kisses, on the few occasions they had kissed, had been passionate, enthusiastic, and clearly longing for more. And yet he himself had been causing her confusion, by letting her get too close to him in his other persona, without explaining to her that he \*was\* Superman. And he now understood what she'd been saying to him in his apartment the previous evening: if she loved Clark, how could she not love Superman? They were the same person; perhaps a little different in personality, but the same man underneath.

He grinned at her. "Well, if I managed to impress you that much last

night, maybe we better see whether I can do it again...?" Before she had a chance to reply, he was reaching for her, pulling her into his arms as his lips sought and found hers. She whimpered softly as he urged her to open her mouth under his and his questing tongue began to explore her.

Her hands buried themselves in his hair, tugging him even closer to her as she kissed him back enthusiastically. His Super-senses could feel her pulse rate escalating as she pressed her body against his as much as was possible in the confined space of the Jeep's interior. His own body was responding enthusiastically as well; his underwear was beginning to feel uncomfortable and he could almost feel his hands shaking as he caressed her face and hair with one hand, the other wrapped around her shoulders.

The loud, startling sound of a car horn broke them apart, and they sat facing each other, both breathing heavily, as another Planet staffer drove past grinning broadly at them.

"My God, Clark, I had no idea you could be so...." Lois exclaimed breathlessly, unable to take her eyes off him.

"So what?" Clark enquired, his own voice a little unsteady. "\*Good\*?"

"Umm... well, that too," she assured him with a grin. "I meant masterful, I guess. You sure took me by surprise - I mean, you're not normally like this with me - it's as if you don't have confidence in your own attractiveness sometimes."

Clark grinned, pleased to see that his tactic in kissing her had been appreciated. "Only when I'm not sure how you feel. But... well, it seemed the right thing to do right now. Before, I never knew how you felt and I've never believed in making a nuisance of myself."

"Oh, you couldn't do that!" she quickly replied, horrified at the thought. "But you being unsure about... that sort of thing did surprise me a little - lately you've been so confident in other ways. Very protective, too. It surprised me how much I liked that, you know," she added, a reflective expression on her face.

"Good." Clark gave her a warm smile, then refocused his attention. "Come on - we need to get upstairs and get that film developed!"

But Lois didn't move, and a hurt look crossed her face. "Clark, you know I can't go into the newsroom. I'm suspended! I can't go into the building - I probably shouldn't even be here!"

Clark stilled, stricken. "Lois, I'm sorry - I didn't think. We should probably have gone somewhere else to get this film printed. Do you want to...?"

"No," she quickly told him. "No, you go on. But call and let me know what's happening, okay?"

"Huh?" Her request took Clark by surprise, until he realised that she assumed he intended her to go home while he carried on with the investigation. He reached out his hand to her again, caressing her face. "No chance. We're still partners, whatever the lawyers say."

I'll get this developed and then I'll be straight back here to get you, trust me."

"You will?" Her eyes were shining, as if Clark's answer has been completely unexpected. "You know, Clark, the more I get to know you, the more I realise just how wrong I was to assume you were just a typical guy when we first met."

Yes, he remembered that early conversation.... "I did tell you I was not your typical male, Lois!" he teased lightly.

"Yes, but it's not just your powers which makes you different," she answered softly. "I just don't know how it took me so long to see that." Changing the subject quickly, she added, "Go on, you need to get going."

"Okay." He hurried from the car, sprinting quickly to the elevator and up to the newsroom. Lois had certainly given him plenty to think about this morning, he reflected en route. There was the whole question of his personality as Superman, and aside from that she was making it clear that their relationship did have a future. Right at that moment, he just wanted to finish the Viologic investigation so that he could take Lois off somewhere they could have a long conversation....

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Lois sat in the Jeep twiddling the dial of the in-car radio, trying not to feel left out. Of course she couldn't go into the newsroom at the moment, but Clark had assured her that he'd come back for her as soon as he could. She trusted him, so she didn't need to feel excluded, did she? But it was hard not to be. She was an award-winning reporter after all, and it was so hard to have to keep away from a big story. Especially when her career was on the line with that big story.

She hoped Clark would remember to tell Perry that Stuart Hoffermand wasn't dead after all. With Stuart alive and able to testify, even if the photos Clark had taken didn't provide them with the evidence they needed, surely the Planet lawyers would feel more confident about fighting the lawsuit?

But there was no point in brooding about that right now. Instead, she turned her attention to Clark and the ways in which he had constantly managed to surprise her that morning. She had been prepared for being amazed at his powers, since no matter how much she had already known about Superman's abilities it was always going to be a shock to the system seeing Clark do Super things. Even so, she had still been left speechless once or twice over the past couple of hours. But even more astonishing had been that kiss. Lois had never been kissed like that before, and she'd had no idea that her apparently mild-mannered partner - < Boy, am I going to have to revise that description of him> she thought to herself - had it in him to kiss with such devastating passion.

She really didn't know very much about Clark's romantic history, Lois realised suddenly. He had mentioned an old college girlfriend once - Lana, Lois thought her name had been - and of course there had been Rachel Harris, though Martha had suggested to Lois that any romantic interest there had been mostly on Rachel's part, not Clark's. But he

had to have had some serious girlfriends, if he was able to kiss like that. Which raised the question... what would he expect from her, and would he be disappointed?

She didn't want Clark to be another federal disaster, Lois acknowledged silently. He was far too important for that. Here was a man who was worth hanging onto - and not for the fact that he was Superman either, although it couldn't be denied that his being Superman was pretty exciting. No, Clark was desirable for his own qualities, because he was a genuinely decent, caring and loyal man, someone who would never let her down if he could possibly avoid it. And she loved him too much, he had become too essential to her well-being for the relationship to be destroyed because he was disappointed in her.

\*Would\* he be disappointed in her? Lois wondered. Quickly, she reminded herself that anyone else she'd loved had seemed to find her a disappointment. < But Clark's not my father, and he's \*certainly\* not Claude!> she also reminded herself.

Still.... He was still Superman. Was a mere human going to be enough for him? Even as Clark Kent he could out-perform her any day. Now that he could use his powers openly in front of her, would he feel that she was holding him back? Was she simply fooling herself to imagine that they could ever have an equal partnership, either at work or in their personal lives?

That was something they would have to discuss.

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"Morning, CK!" Jimmy hailed Clark just as he exited the elevator, and he quickly held out a hand to halt the younger man's progress.

"Jimmy! I need you to do something for me - develop this film," he explained, handing the camera over. "And it's urgent, okay?"

"When isn't anything urgent?" Jimmy grumbled good-naturedly, but he accepted the film and hurried off, leaving Clark to cross to his desk and check his post.

"Hey, Clark! How's Lois doing?"

"Chief!" Clark spun around to find his boss standing close by. "She's doing okay - a lot better today than she was yesterday," he added, finding himself uncharacteristically wanting to inflict some feelings of guilt on Perry. He knew that the editor hadn't had a lot of choice about suspending Lois, but on the other hand he hadn't seen her the previous afternoon.

"She is, huh?" Perry seemed relieved. "Clark, you know I didn't want to do that! But Judas Priest, those lawyers... they just didn't leave me with any choice, son."

"Yeah, I know," Clark acknowledged wryly, shrugging in faint apology at his earlier attitude. "It's tough though, when we're sure Lois is right."

Perry sighed heavily. "Son, I'd love to believe she's right. Well, I

had to believe she was, else I wouldn't have approved that story. But with Viologic suing, and her source dead - "

"Ah, but that's where we were all wrong, Chief," Clark cut in. "Hofferman isn't dead. He faked his death to protect himself from Viologic." Quickly, he filled Perry in on Lois's deductions and their discovery of Stuart Hofferman at his friend's apartment.

"Well, that's great news, Kent!" Perry exclaimed. "You call Lois up and tell her to get herself and Hofferman over here right now, and I'll get back on to the lawyers, tell them we can make our story stand up in court."

Clark hesitated; it was a good idea, but his gut instinct was telling him to wait until he'd seen what those exposures would contain. "Later, Chief - we're following another lead right now - " He realised what he'd said immediately and broke off.

Perry White was too experienced to miss a slip like that, however, and his knowing gaze focused on Clark. "\*We\* are?"

"Um... Chief...." Clark trailed off, unwilling to dig himself an even deeper hole.

"Now, son, I didn't get to be the editor of the Daily Planet without understanding my reporters," Perry informed him in a meaningful drawl. "I know Lois, and I know you too, Kent. Let's just say I didn't hear what you just said, and I have no idea what you might have been up to before you got in this morning either, and we'll leave it at that, okay?"

Clark nodded, and Perry turned to head back to his own office. He'd barely taken two steps before he paused and glanced back. "You tell Lois to be careful, okay? Just because her source wasn't actually murdered doesn't mean she's automatically safe."

Raising an eyebrow in acknowledgement, Clark replied, "I'll do that, Chief."

He'd barely had time to check his email when Jimmy came running up with the developed prints. Clark scanned them very quickly at his desk, ensuring that Jimmy couldn't quite see that he'd allowed his glasses to slip slightly down the bridge of his nose. What he read made him go very still for the briefest of moments before he turned back to Jimmy and gave him terse instructions.

Then he headed for the stairwell; a quick X-ray to ensure that no-one else was around and he ran down at Super-speed. Lois was still in the Jeep, and he hurried over.

"Clark - what's happened?" She'd obviously seen his agitation.

"We've got proof the switches were faulty," he explained briefly. "But the same switches were also supplied to the transit authority for fitting to the new automated subway."

Lois gasped in horror. "But Clark, that has its inaugural run this morning! And... your parents are - "

"Are on it, I know," he finished curtly.

"I got them the tickets," she finished blankly.

"Lois!" Clark needed his partner calm and performing at full capacity. "I'm going to get over there...." He mimed a flying movement. "Can you drive over - take Jimmy, he'll meet you out front. Try to call the police on the way if you can, okay?"

"Sure," she replied, but he'd already gone.

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< My folks... got to get there in time....> The words replayed over and over in Clark's mind as he flew. He was aware that the subway run would already have started, though he'd tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that his Super-hearing hadn't picked up any screams. But he had no idea just when the switches were designed to fail, or how much time he would have once they did.

Spotting a subway station beneath him, he darted down and, doing his best to avoid commuters who were too slow to get out of his way, he flew down into the dark depths.

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Lois had indeed found Jimmy outside the Planet entrance, and once he was in the front seat she threw her mobile phone at him and instructed him to make the call to the police.

Jimmy caught the phone, but looked enquiringly at Lois. "Where'd CK get to?"

Suddenly realising just what Clark had been dealing with on his own for more than a year, Lois thought quickly. "Oh - he said he'd meet us there. There was something else he needed to do first."

"Wonder what that was?" Jimmy wondered aloud, clearly expecting an answer.

Time for Mad Dog Lane to reassert herself, Lois decided grimly. "Jimmy - the police?"

"Oh - sure." He made the call, giving Lois the opportunity to try to prepare a better excuse for Clark should it be proven necessary when Jimmy ended his call. However, the closer they got to the station which was to be the end of the line, the more traffic there was about, which took up all her attention in driving and Jimmy's in looking about them.

Eventually, when the latest traffic jam seemed to indicate gridlock, Lois wound down her window and called to a nearby traffic cop. "What's the problem?"

"You won't get any further, lady," the cop called back. "There's a problem on the subway - the emergency vehicles are all trying to get through."

"Dammit!" Lois grunted, pulling the steering wheel sharply to the right to steer the Jeep to the kerb. Ignoring completely the angry



shouts and hoots of other motorists, she simply cut the engine and yelled at Jimmy to follow her.

"Hey - you can't leave that there! Lady - lady, come back!" the cop called.

"Lois, you'll get towed!" Jimmy yelled.

She glanced back briefly. "So? Won't be the first time." < And maybe Superman can come get it for me before I get towed, or explain to the traffic cops that I was helping him....> she thought with an amused grin. "Come \*on,\* Jimmy!"

By the time they got to the subway station and fought their way down to the track-level, battling past commuters and dignitaries who were desperately trying to make their escape, it seemed as if disaster was about to happen. The train was running out of control, speeding along the track with no working brakes. And less than a hundred yards away from the end of the platform at this station were the buffers, with a brick wall immediately behind.

< Clark, you've got to stop it! You have to!> Lois told herself frantically over and over as they ran.

Just then, Jimmy let out a shout. "Superman!"

"Where?" Lois demanded.

"Dunno - I heard someone say he's down there!"

They emerged onto the platform just in time to see the train approaching at high speed, with Superman flying above it. Lois watched, reminding herself as she did so that this was \*Clark\* she was seeing. \*Clark\* was flying faster than the train. \*Clark\* was landing on the track in front of the train, bracing his heels on the rails and allowing himself to be pushed backwards by the force of the train's movement so that his stopping of it would not be so abrupt that people would be hurt, \*Clark\* who was applying Super-strength and force to slow the train down.

The end of the line was approaching rapidly; Lois's heart was in her mouth as she watched. She could hardly bear to look as she saw Clark being forced backwards, getting closer and closer to the wall. Reason told her Superman couldn't be hurt; emotion told her that she couldn't bear to see the man she loved crushed between a brick wall and several hundred tons of train.

She closed her eyes involuntarily; just as she did so a tremendous roar went up and she heard Jimmy yelling and whistling beside her. Daring to look around again, she saw that the train had come to a halt mere inches from the buffers, and that Superman was already darting inside to check that no-one was hurt. Jimmy's camera was also whirring away as he took photographs of the Super-hero; too bad they wouldn't be exclusive, Lois thought. But there were other journalists there, who had imagined they would simply be covering the new subway and who now found they had stumbled on the story of what could have been a major disaster.

A figure detaching itself from the crowd and slipping towards an exit caught Lois's attention suddenly; why would anyone be leaving at this

stage? Everyone else was busy watching Superman and staring at the shaken-up passengers emerging from the train.

Lois nudged Jimmy; he turned and emitted a low whistle. "Eric Thorpe." A thought struck him, and he added quickly, "His signature was on the document, Lois! The one authorising the dispatch of the switches!"

"Come on," she instructed. The two hurried after Thorpe, but he spotted his tail and spun around; seeing who was following him he stopped and threw them a scornful glance.

"The nosy reporter - oh, and an office junior! Sorry, but I have to be going." He tried to put on a spurt of speed, but Lois was on top of him; a quick Tai Kwon Do move, and Thorpe was flat on his back.

"Hang on, Lois - he's mine too!" another voice called, and Stuart Hofferaman came running up. "I heard on the news... and I guessed it was more of the defective switches." He stood over Thorpe with Lois, his foot on the man's chest in a symbolic gesture of conquest as Jimmy's camera clicked away.

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Much later, once they were done with police statements and Lois's Jeep - miraculously not towed - Lois and Clark stood in front of the Editor-in-Chief's desk filling him in on the rest of the story. Perry shook his head in disbelief several times during the course of the story, but saved his comments until the end.

"You two never cease to amaze me!" he told them. "And, uh, do I even want to know just how you managed to get hold of that report?"

Lois grinned. "I don't think so, Chief."

"Well, it doesn't matter now anyway. Somehow I don't think Viologic's going to be disputing any of that front-page story you two are going to be writing for me. Which reminds me," he added quickly, "I called the lawyers as soon as Jimmy called me from the subway station. I told them there and then that I was reinstating you on the spot, and if they had any problem with that, they could report me to Mr Stern. So you're back on staff, Lois. And if Viologic doesn't withdraw the suit, the Planet will counter-sue," the editor added, a broad grin on his face.

Delighted to be back, Lois just smiled. "Come on, partner, I guess we'd better get this story written!"

Clark put his hand lightly on Lois's shoulder to guide her back to her desk; the small intimacy, something he frequently did, now seemed to carry far greater significance. She turned and smiled at him, welcoming the tender look in his eyes as he met her gaze.

"Later," she whispered.

"Later," he agreed in a soft murmur. It was probably a good idea not to let their colleagues guess that Lane and Kent were closer than their working relationship required, Clark thought as he accompanied Lois back to her desk, keeping a discreet distance between them.

She stood in front of her desk for a moment, studying the familiar work surface. It was just a desk, with a computer, a file cabinet and a couple of pot-plants, but for a while she had thought there was a possibility she'd never see it again. It was great to be back. Just allowing the relief to flood over her for a moment, she stood and trailed her hand lightly over the desk surface.

A discreet cough sounded behind her; she turned to see Perry standing there, a small piece of card in his hand.

"I, uh, forgot to give you this back," he said loudly, his eyes twinkling. It was her press pass.

Lois took it, but she wasn't fooled by her editor and mentor's apparent forgetfulness. He had engineered this deliberately, so that the entire newsroom staff would see that Lois Lane was back on the job and with the full confidence of the editor-in-chief. Truly she had some great friends at the Planet. She had been in danger of forgetting that in the immediate aftermath of her almost-wedding, but her friends had not abandoned her.

"It's great to have you back, partner," Clark's voice intruded upon her musings. Yes, he was at it too; his tones had been deliberately pitched so that they would carry across the bullpen.

She caught his gaze and held it. "It's great to \*be\* back, partner!"

As he continued to smile at her, she couldn't resist. "Our byline is going to look great on a Pulitzer someday."

He raised an eyebrow, not remotely surprised that she was aiming that high - nor did he seem surprised that she had said 'our'. "Yeah, but whose name is going to go first?" he enquired challengingly.

She grinned: what did he expect? "Mine, of course."

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Finally they were able to leave the Planet. It had taken longer than Lois had hoped to get their story written up; not only did they get interrupted several times by the police wanting further information, but Planet colleagues kept coming up to congratulate Lois on her return and the lifting of her suspension. < I never knew I had so many friends here> she thought incredulously. It would have made sense had it been Clark who'd been suspended; after all, everyone liked Clark! But she was used to being perceived as unfriendly, not a team player, so it was surprising that her co-workers were making the effort.

Clark, however, had grinned at her at one point. "I guess people like you better than you think! Or else they all know that Mad Dog Lane was only an act."

Clark had also had to cope with interruptions, notably Jimmy wanting to satisfy his curiosity about exactly what Clark had been doing to prevent him travelling to the subway station with Lois. Once Superman

had finished his rescue activities and given a brief interview to the members of the press present, the Super-hero had flown off. Shortly afterwards, the familiar figure of Clark Kent had been seen mingling with the passengers of the sabotaged train, interviewing them about their experience and scribbling notes in a little notebook. He had explained to Jimmy afterwards that initially, after Superman had stopped the train, he had been making sure his parents were okay.

< Reasonable cover-up> Lois thought in amusement. < Better than some he's come up with over the last year!> But then, she had no intention of challenging him on some of his lame excuses; after all, she had believed them, or at any rate, she hadn't tried to see what was beyond them.

And Superman had also been needed during the course of the early afternoon; Clark's attention had become distracted briefly before he'd leaned closer to her and quietly told her where he was going. He hadn't been gone long, but Lois had felt warmed by the fact that he'd told her what he was doing. Even though Lane and Kent were not writing up this particular Superman story, she still felt a closer connection to Clark through his willingness to share the knowledge of his activities with her.

Now finally they were finished, and Clark had asked Perry for the remainder of the day off. His parents were due to return to Smallville, and he wanted to go to the airport with them; he'd explained that Lois would like to see them off as well. Perry, never one to need too much in the way of explanation, had simply grinned and told his two star reporters to be in early the following day.

"So we see your folks off, and then we get to talk?" Lois asked as they travelled down to the parking garage in the elevator.

"Guess so," Clark agreed, then grinned suddenly. "You realise I haven't spoken to them since you came over at four o'clock this morning - they'll still be waiting for an explanation. And if I know my Mom, she'll be reading other things into it as well."

"Like...?" Lois prompted.

Clark seemed to squirm a little. "You know, Lois - what do Moms always want? She knew I was in love with you before I realised it myself!"

"Clever Martha!" Lois laughed wryly. "If only she'd talked to me - I'm pretty sure she'd have managed to sort me out before I ever accepted Lex's proposal."

Clark reached for Lois's hand. "Come on, Lois, you can't beat yourself up over that for ever. It was as much my fault for getting you confused over Superman."

She squeezed his hand gratefully. "That's really sweet of you, Clark, but I still accepted him, which was probably the craziest thing I ever did in my life."

As they reached the Jeep, Clark paused and leaned across to kiss Lois briefly, tenderly, on the lips. "No-one calls the woman I love crazy, okay?"

"Okay!" She laughed softly, very touched by the sentiment.

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"Right - what do you want to do now?"

They were standing in the concourse of Metropolis Airport having just waved Jonathan and Martha Kent through the departure gates. Clark raised an eyebrow at Lois as he waited for her answer; he knew what he wanted to do, but since they'd just spent an hour in his parents' company trying to evade questions about the state of their relationship, he wasn't altogether sure that she would want to spend time just talking.

But she slipped her hand through his arm and snuggled closer to him. "Take me somewhere we can talk, Clark. Somewhere we won't be interrupted. Oh, I know you'll probably have to go and be... you-know-who... at some point, but...." She trailed off and smiled warmly at him.

"Come on." He urged her towards the exit, saying once they'd returned to the Jeep, "And I suppose your suggestion that I take you somewhere means you want to go by Superman Express?"

Lois giggled. "Superman \*Express\*?"

"That's what my folks and I call flying with me," he explained. "Speaking of my folks... you didn't mind them treating you as if we were...?" He trailed off, somehow reluctant to put into words the concept of Lois and himself as a couple.

< Well, aren't we?> was Lois's initial question. After all, they had both been honest about their feelings for each other, Clark had confessed about Superman - surely that said more than any words that they were making a commitment to each other. But Clark had said earlier that he wanted to talk; knowing her partner's strong sense of honour and ethics, perhaps he felt he needed to explain some more about himself before he would be happy about taking their relationship a step further. Well, that was okay....

"Clark, I love your parents," Lois assured him. "Compared to mine, they're so \*normal\* - you're such a normal family - "

"What?" He turned to look at her, an incredulous expression on his face. "\*Normal\* - when one of us can fly?"

Lois shrugged. "Well, that's the other thing which makes your family so normal. You're all so matter-of-fact about what you can do, apart from being concerned to keep it a secret. Your folks treat your super-powers just like... well, like your mom's artistic talent. It's just something you do."

"Yeah, I guess it is," Clark reflected. "But then, we are pretty much used to it by now. I started getting these powers when I was about nine or ten, though I didn't fly until I was eighteen."

She nodded, loving these insights into Clark's history which, up until the previous evening, would have seemed pure fantasy. Already,

it seemed she was becoming used to the idea of her best friend being Superman in his spare time; her memories of time spent with the Super-hero were gradually becoming reconciled with her acceptance of Superman's true identity. "But what I like most about your folks, Clark, is that they treat me like I'm one of the family. You know what my family's like - if you want an example of a dysfunctional family, that's us. I've always envied you Jonathan and Martha."

Clark turned his head to study her for a few moments, intent as she was on her driving. He had known about her family problems for quite a while, and had never been able to understand how an intelligent man like Sam Lane could allow two beautiful and intelligent daughters like Lois and Lucy to feel failures. Yet that was precisely what he had done by his treatment of them; and his behaviour towards his wife had been even worse. He frowned suddenly: had Lois been sub-consciously searching for security all her life because of her father and the break-up of her parents' marriage? Had \*that\* been why she had accepted Luthor's proposal - because he had seemed to offer her stability and security? Respect?

He didn't know, and he wasn't going to insult her by attempting to psycho-analyse her. Instead, he smiled warmly. "My parents liked you the moment they met you, Lois, and they also know you're special to me. Of course they treat you like one of the family."

< Does that mean \*Clark\* wants me to be one of the family?> Lois immediately wondered, then stilled as she asked herself what it was she wanted. There was still the problem that her new knowledge of Clark left her feeling a little inadequate next to him.

Once back in his apartment, Clark raised an eyebrow at Lois. "So where do you want to go?"

She considered for a moment. "It had better be somewhere no-one's going to recognise us together," she suggested thoughtfully.

"Don't worry - no-one will see me as Superman," Clark assured her. "So...?"

"I'd like to go for a walk in the mountains," Lois offered, with an almost shy smile.

"Let's go, then." He immediately spun into the Superman outfit, eliciting another gasp from Lois; clearly the fact that she'd already seen him do this a couple of times didn't make the manoeuvre any less amazing. He held out his arms to her. "Ready?"

Flying with Superman seemed somehow even more exciting than it had ever been in the past, Lois considered; the knowledge that she was with the man she loved more than anything else in the world, and that he loved her in return, certainly helped to make the occasion sheer pleasure. This time, her love would not be making an excuse to disappear as soon as they reached their destination. If she reached up and brushed her lips against his jaw, he would not flinch from the embrace. And she suspected that he was holding her closer to him than he had ever done before.

As if he'd been able to read her thoughts, Clark bent his head and brushed his lips along her forehead. Lois raised her head and smiled

at him, ignoring the harsh feel of the wind rushing past them and instead focusing on the beloved face of the man holding her as he flew them both to their destination. Reaching up, she caught his lips with her own; he responded for a brief moment before drawing back.

"Got to concentrate on flying," he murmured in her ear, a faint laugh in his voice.

Some time later, he landed them in a secluded clearing and, shielded by the trees all around them, Clark spun back into casual clothes. Holding out his hand to Lois, he smiled warmly at her. "Want to walk?"

She took his hand, enjoying the sensation of his larger hand enclosing her much smaller one, his fingers entwined with hers. They strolled in silence for a few moments, simply enjoying the scenery. Then Clark broke the stillness.

"So... what do you want to talk about? I guess you must have a lot of questions...?"

She did, Lois knew; but she also remembered another part of her discussion with Clark the previous evening, something which had taken her very much by surprise. Glancing across and up at him, she spoke softly. "I do, but first I think we need to talk about Lex."

Clark halted, turning to look at her with a frown which, to Lois, hinted at the hurt he still felt. "Luthor? But why...?"

"Because of what you thought about my feelings for him, Clark," Lois replied firmly. "We have to get this out in the open if our relationship is going to have any chance."

His hand tightened around hers momentarily. Then he said quickly, "You were going to marry him - I understand why you said yes to him, and I know part of it's my fault. That doesn't bother me. But... I thought lately that you still had some feelings for him, Lois. I know you called him a monster, but you were upset when you found he'd been married before, you had dreams about him - okay, nightmares, but you still hadn't forgotten him - and you still call him Lex. That's why I thought..."

Lois interrupted as Clark hesitated. "I call him Lex because I always called him that, right from the first time we had dinner together over a year ago. It's just habit! It doesn't mean anything." She stood facing Clark, breathing heavily as she tried to get through to him with her words. Was this what he had been thinking for the past few weeks? In that case, it was no wonder he'd been reluctant to push her towards a relationship, or to take her up on her hints about her own feelings.

She reached out and touched his arm with her free one, willing him to understand. "I was upset about his first marriage because it was yet another lie, and it was something he didn't even need to lie about! I mean, why would it have bothered me that he'd been married and divorced years earlier? But it made me wonder just how much of what he told me about our relationship was a lie. And okay, you may say that that means I did still have feelings for him, but I don't think it does! It means I felt a fool, a dupe. He claimed to care about me,

and he was only using me all along."

Lois fell silent, and Clark stared at her in disbelief. How could he have misunderstood the situation so badly? How could he have been so wrapped up in his own jealousy, even after Luthor's death, that he had failed to see exactly how Lois had been affected by the man's behaviour? His own suspicions now seemed so ludicrous in the light of what she'd just revealed to him, and he felt ashamed of himself for having suggested that she might still care for her ex-fiance. "So... you felt bad enough when you discovered he was a criminal, but it was even worse when you realised the deception was personal too?"

"I was an \*idiot,\* Clark!" Lois threw at him. "Not only was I completely fooled as a \*professional,\* which is bad enough considering I'm supposed to be one of the best investigative reporters in town - "

"\*The\* best," Clark interrupted quietly, reaching to take her other hand in his as well, gripping them comfortingly as he gazed down at her, his love and concern for her evident in his eyes.

"Well, whatever. But I got him completely wrong, Clark!" Lois continued. "And then as if that wasn't bad enough my instincts about him \*personally\* were all wrong too. He said he loved me, that I was special to me, that he wanted me in his life, that we'd be a partnership... and all along he was lying. He didn't want me as a partner; you told me he intended to control me. He never really loved me - he couldn't have, or he'd never have tried to kill my best friend. He'd never have lied to me about the Planet insurance policies either. Clark, how can I ever trust my instincts about anyone ever again?" she finished on a wail, her eyes bright with unshed tears as she stared up at him.

Clark quickly dropped her hands and pulled her into his embrace, wrapping his arms tightly around her and stroking her hair. "Lois, that's crazy! You have great instincts - okay, you were wrong about Luthor, but so were thousands of other people. Even the President! You can't beat yourself up over this. The guy set himself out to charm people, and he had the talent to do it."

"Maybe, but I got closer than most," Lois protested.

"Sure, but he was still keeping up a very clever act," Clark reiterated. "Come on, look at this another way. What do your instincts tell you about me?" he teased suddenly, throwing her a crooked smile.

She stepped back a little from him, still remaining within his loose embrace. "Umm... that you're a pretty Super guy! Seriously, I know I can trust you with my life. You're the most honest, decent guy I've ever known."

His mouth curved into a broad grin. "Told you you've got great instincts, Lois. Just trust 'em - I do."

Removing his arms from around her, he turned and draped one arm loosely about her shoulders, urging her on. "Seriously, it's pretty generous of you to describe me as honest when I pretended to you that I was two different people."



Lois shrugged. "You had your reasons for that. I really understand, Clark."

That was his major concern dismissed, Clark realised with a huge sense of relief. Lois had been making it clear since that morning that she wasn't angry with him, but that she was prepared to forgive the deception altogether was wonderful news. Even though he had felt he'd had no choice but to keep his true nature secret from her, he did understand how it could have looked from her point of view.

"Thank you," he murmured huskily, twisting suddenly and bending to place a swift kiss on her lips. She returned the pressure, her lips opening under his, and the kiss deepened for several seconds before he pulled away reluctantly.

"I'm sorry I got it so wrong about your feelings for Luthor," he apologised then, his tone contrite. "I should have seen what was really on your mind - you gave me enough clues."

Lois shook her head, however. "Clark - you had your own reasons for not seeing it. You were in love with me long before I ever realised it, so I guess it's not surprising you saw my hang-ups as maybe something of an obsession." She stopped walking abruptly, moving out of Clark's embrace to face him. "But that's all over now. I haven't had any nightmares since that night I spent at your place...." She paused suddenly, blushing a little as she recalled what else had happened that night; when she raised her gaze to Clark's it was obvious that he was remembering the same incident.

"Lex Luthor is history, Clark," she insisted, pushing those errant thoughts aside for the moment. "He's dead. And even if he wasn't, he'd be out of my life anyway. I have no feelings for him, other than contempt. I know it's taken me a while, but I want to move on."

"Move on... to what?" Clark asked, a note of tension in his voice.

"I don't need to tell you, surely?" Lois threw back at him. "After the last couple of weeks... after the way you kissed me last night and this morning...?"

He gave her a lop-sided smile. "Well, I was hoping... but I had to be sure. I needed to know you could still accept me after what you found out last night." His jaw twitched briefly, a sure sign to Lois that her best friend was still not entirely sure of himself where she was concerned.

"You're kidding, right, Clark? What did I find out? That not only could I have the man I love more than I ever thought I could love anyone, but I could have my favourite Super-hero too - that's supposed to be bad news?" She grinned at him, then added challengingly, "Anyway, I thought what you did last night was staking your claim on me."

He couldn't help but laugh aloud at that. "I didn't see it that way at the time, Lois. I thought you were mad at me, so I wanted to remind you what it was we had going for us. I knew... well, I was pretty sure, after the Kerths, that you were attracted to me."

"I \*love\* you, Clark," Lois pointed out. "Sure, I'm attracted to you too, but it's more than that."

"For me too," he assured her sincerely. Then, halting their progress again, he continued, "So... we're dating? You're my girl?" He gave her a lop-sided grin at the last question.

Clark's words recalled to Lois one of their very early conversations, in which she had satirised what she saw as a 'date,' Kansas-style. She paused in wonder then as she realised that, at root, Superman really just was a country boy after all. He'd told her that earlier, of course, but she hadn't quite believed it.

Although nothing would have made her happier than to answer Clark's question in the affirmative, something made Lois hesitate. Despite her own encouragement to him a little earlier, she did still have concerns about them as a couple; her earlier fears came to the forefront of her mind again and refused to allow her to commit herself. Instead, she chose to be a little flippant. "Can Superman have a girl?"

Clark took her question seriously, as she might have expected him to. "No, Superman can't - but I can. It just means that when I'm Superman we'll have to pretend that you're just the reporter who's managed to get a few exclusives - no more."

Lois didn't reply, and after a few moments Clark began to walk on again with his arm around her, wondering what was on her mind this time. But he told himself very quickly that it was probably a bad idea simply to wait for Lois to tell him: she might, but then again, if she was worried about something, she might not.

"Lois?" He gave her a little shake. "What is it - you don't want to date me after all?"

She gave him a wry grimace. "Of course I do, Clark. It's just... well...." She hesitated, shrugged a little, then dropped her gaze to the ground. Clark continued to watch her, dropping his arm from her shoulders to hold her slim frame in both of his hands.

"Lois? Come on, you can tell me. If we can't talk to each other after everything we've been through the last few weeks, the things we've told each other.... I'm still your best friend even if we don't end up together." He stopped as a sudden thought hit him: was that what was worrying her? "Lois? Are you afraid that if this doesn't work out, we won't be friends any more? Because I promise you, I would not let that happen."

His quiet, insistent reassurance encouraged Lois to meet his gaze again. "No, it's not that, Clark. I think I convinced myself a while ago that our friendship should be strong enough to last." She grimaced again. "It's just... well, I had it all worked out yesterday. Lois Lane and Clark Kent - perfect partners in work and out of it. A truly equal partnership in every way. And then you hit me with the bombshell - that's part of what I've been thinking about, last night and today."

Clark stilled: what exactly was she saying? "Lois, that sounds just great to me," he murmured huskily. "You've just described my perfect

fantasy." He couldn't resist, dipping his head to kiss her quickly, hoping that actions would convince her where his words might not.

She returned his kiss, but then broke away before it could become any more intense. "Clark, how can we have an equal partnership when one of the partners is Superman?"

That shocked him; he hadn't at all anticipated that Lois would somehow see herself as inferior in the light of her knowledge of the real Clark Kent. "Lois, what are you talking about?" he demanded incredulously. "You are all I've ever wanted... and, you know, there are so many things you're so much better at than I am. My powers are just something I can do - they don't make one bit of difference to the way I feel about you, or what I want from our relationship."

But she wasn't convinced. "Clark... you can \*fly\*! You can read and move at Super-speed, you can see through things, you can hear things from a long way away - you don't need a partner to get great stories!"

"No?" He faced her, his expression challenging. "Then why did I say less than a week ago that you taught me everything I know? Lois, you are \*brilliant\*! And you of all people have to know that there's so much more to good journalism than just cheating to find out a few things. You've got incredible talent. And your writing... the energy just flows off the page. Sure, my powers sometimes help to get information, but that's only a very small part of the job."

Seeing that Lois was at least listening, he caressed her face with his hand, continuing softly. "Come on, Lois! You were doubting yourself a few weeks ago, but you got over that. Don't start again just because you've found out I occasionally cheat a little."

That got him a smile, a flash of the real Lois Lane. "Okay, maybe you're right there, though I guess I was kind of wondering how I was going to be able to keep up with you on the job."

"You're kidding, Lois!" Clark laughed incredulously. "I spend most of my time trying to keep up with you - you have these crazy leaps of logic which, nine times out of ten, actually turn out to get us to the answer. And all I can do is wonder how you do it."

Lois laughed then, patting his arm teasingly. "Stick around a little longer, partner, and you might begin to learn." Her expression sobered then. "But, Clark, seriously - are you sure you want \*me\* as a girlfriend? I mean, with all the things you can do... why would you be satisfied with me?"

Before she even had time to gauge his intentions, she was in his arms again and being held tightly in his embrace. "Lois - how many times do I have to tell you that you're the only woman I want? If you mean that I can fly and you can't, well, just tell me when's the last time you saw any Kryptonian women around here? And even if there were any," he added firmly, "I only want you."

"Oh, Clark," Lois murmured, allowing him to draw her nearer still for a passionate kiss. "You just say the most romantic things...." Any further words were blotted out by kisses.

Some time later, when he allowed her the freedom to speak again, Lois voiced the other thing on her mind. "The problem is, Clark, that, like I told you, all my relationships so far have been pretty disastrous. I... maybe I'm just a bad risk."

"No way," he insisted. "You just haven't found the right man up until now. And I refuse to believe that we aren't right for each other. I knew you were the one for me the first time I saw you."

"Whereas I wasted so much time by missing what was right under my nose," Lois said wryly. "First I was swooning over Superman, then I was letting myself be flattered by Lex Luthor."

"Hey, swooning over Superman is perfectly acceptable," Clark replied with a grin. "In fact, I can promise you that Superman will insist on it!"

"Only if I don't do it in public," Lois quipped. "I get it!"

Clark grinned back at her. "You're learning fast, partner!" The grin disappearing to be replaced by an anxious expression, he spoke more seriously. "So... have I convinced you? Are we a... couple?"

Lois studied Clark's expression; he seemed to mean what he'd said. And she reminded herself that in all the time she'd known this man, he had never lied to her other than to protect his other identity. If he said he wanted her regardless of her objections, then he meant it.

And maybe he was right, and it was time she stopped punishing herself for past mistakes. Not all men were like Claude, or Lex Luthor, or even Sam Lane. Clark certainly wasn't. And he wanted \*her.\* So....

She raised her gaze to his again, an impish grin on her face. "I think we've been acting like we are for at least a couple of weeks now, and I guess a lot of people have believed it, too. Yeah, it's time we both admitted it's what we want."

Clark gazed down at Lois, an earnest expression in his deep brown eyes. "You're sure it's what \*you\* want?"

"Clark, it's \*definitely\* what I want," Lois assured him. "I guess I just had doubts about whether I was right for you."

He gave her a little shake. "I never want to hear you say that again. You are \*perfect\* for me, and I consider myself fortunate that I found you." As she smiled in response to his words, he bent his head and kissed her again, a deeply passionate kiss which stirred both their souls as they strained to touch, and caress, and be close to each other.

The embrace was abruptly interrupted as the heavens opened, and within seconds they were drenched. Lois broke away from Clark and looked down at herself ruefully, shaking her top as water dripped freely from it. Clark looked no better: his hair hung in wet strands and his T-shirt and jeans were soaked.

He quickly took Lois's arm and ran with her into the trees; as he was

about to speak, he realised that she was shivering. Quickly he removed his glasses and attracted her attention, gesturing to her to stay still. As she watched him with a puzzled expression, he swept her up and down with a gentle blast of his heat vision, warming her and drying her clothes and hair at the same time, though he was careful to keep the heat away from her face.

Lois patted herself in amazement, feeling her now-dry clothes. "Clark...! That's incredible!"

He laughed, enjoying her stupefaction. "But you knew I could do that."

"Yeah, I guess.... But what about you? You're soaked too."

"I don't feel the cold," he told her. "And anyway...." He trailed off, instead beginning to spin and a second later stood in front of her clad in the Superman suit. "I think we should go back - this rain's not going to stop any time soon."

As he lifted her into his arms, Lois shook her head in disbelief. "I guess that's why you never got warm during the heatwave." How many more surprises did Clark have up his sleeve? she wondered as he floated them up into the air and began the flight back to Metropolis. His abilities didn't bother her; he'd managed to reassure her on the question of whether she was what he wanted. She could foresee some interesting times ahead as she became accustomed to what he could do....

Take the flying, and the floating, she mused as they travelled. That could have some interesting uses... for a moment she allowed herself to visualise making love with Clark and ending up on the ceiling. But that was ridiculous, she reasoned with a faint frown. \*He\* might be able to float, but he'd have to hold on to her to bring her with him, and surely he wouldn't be able to concentrate on keeping hold of her...?

But the question of making love with Clark was something they had yet to discuss, and for the time being Lois shied away from the prospect. It wasn't that she didn't want to, but... the question she had asked herself earlier was still unanswered. Could she possibly be able to satisfy \*Superman\* in bed? However much Clark wanted to be treated as a normal guy, he wasn't. He had all these Super-abilities: that had to make him different in some respects. Not that she wanted to consider right now just \*how\* different he might be, but given that Lois's previous experiences with sex had not been positive, she would have felt wary about going to bed with any new boyfriend. The fact that Clark had turned out to be Superman as well made her concerns in that respect even more even more of a reason for anxiety.

< Forget that for now....> she told herself, turning her attention to other areas in which Clark's talents could come in useful. She grinned suddenly as she remembered his visit to her as Superman the previous afternoon, then raised her head as she heard his voice close to her ear.

"Lois - what's so funny?"

She grinned up at him. "Oh - I was just thinking that you'd be pretty useful around the house. The way you cleared up my mess

yesterday...!"

"Ah," he laughed in return. "Yeah, I am pretty good at cleaning. Think that's worth keeping me around for?"

"Well... I do hate housework."

"Don't care for it much myself," he quipped back, "but I guess when I can do it in ten seconds flat it's not so bad."

"Consider yourself hired!" she assured him.

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Once they were back at Clark's apartment, Lois gained yet another insight into what life as Clark's girlfriend would be like when he immediately offered to get takeout from any part of the world she fancied. Given the choice of French, Italian, Chinese, Thai, Indian, Mexican, Greek or any other type of food she wanted, authentically prepared, she felt spoilt for choice. Then a thought struck her.

"Clark - that wouldn't be where that Chinese takeout came from, that first time we pulled an all-nighter at the Planet?"

He grinned. "Busted! Does this mean you'll always want that kind of service now?"

"Only the best, Clark," she teased him before requesting a selection of Indian curries.

Later, after they'd eaten, Clark returned to a topic which was worrying him a little. Tugging Lois gently towards him so that she was half-lying across his lap, with one of his arms around her shoulders and his free hand idly caressing her face and hair, he sighed gently. "You know what my being Superman means for us, don't you?"

Lois gazed up at him, bringing her own hand up to caress his cheek. "In what way?"

"Well, for example, that I might get called away at any second, no matter what we're doing at the time," he explained softly. "I mean, sitting here with you like this - I don't know when I've been happier, and if I was just Clark Kent, nothing on earth would make me leave you. But if I hear a call for help, I have to go."

Lois was silent for a moment; then she nodded. "I understand. That's the way you are, Clark, and I'd never want to change that. I couldn't. Superman *has* to go where he's needed. I guess that's not to say I'm always going to be happy about it, but as long as you remember it's not *you* I'm frustrated with, it's the situation...?"

Happier, he bent to kiss her swiftly. "It's not going to be easy all the same, sweetheart. I mean, we could have made plans - like that dinner date we agreed on a few days ago? But if something comes up and I'm needed, a major disaster maybe, I'm just going to have to go. And I might not even be able to warn you about it."

"At least I'll know where you've gone," Lois quickly responded. "That's what was tough sometimes, when we were doing something and you just made some stupid excuse and ran off, or you just disappeared for hours on end when we were at work. I know now, and I can help cover for you in future." She grinned up at him suddenly. "But I want a reward for doing that."

"You do?" He laughed softly, his breath tickling her. "I think I can arrange that...." His lips hovered over hers, deliberately teasing her by dragging out the preliminary to the kiss.

Lois reached up and tugged his head down to hers, losing herself in their kiss for a long moment; their tongues intertwined as their lips clung together and passion flared between them. Clark broke the kiss, an intense, passionate look in his dark eyes as he drew back, his breathing heavy. "Is that reward enough for now?" he enquired huskily.

"Oh, it was wonderful!" she assured him, her own eyes dancing with delight. "But that actually wasn't what I was thinking about. I want you to take me with you sometimes when you go off to do rescues."

Clark hesitated. "I'm not sure that's a great idea, Lois. You know, the things I do can be dangerous, and anyway we don't want to take the risk that you might be seen arriving with me. If you're seen with Superman too often, it could lead to suspicions."

"I know that, Clark," Lois assured him, a little impatiently. "But there will be times when it'll be okay, when it's a story I could legitimately cover for the Planet anyway, and when there'd be somewhere safe for us to land where I wouldn't be seen with you, surely?"

He considered. It wasn't that he was averse to the idea of taking Lois with him sometimes, but he didn't want to take any chances that she might get hurt - and he certainly didn't want her openly associated with Superman, because that would certainly lead to people trying to use her to get at him. Although he recognised that Lois wouldn't be happy if she thought he was trying to control her, he was actually worried about her safety. He was invulnerable, she was not. But would she understand that if he explained it? Maybe now wasn't the time. But he would discuss it with her, and try to get her to understand that, while he had great respect for her ability to look after herself, he was concerned about her. So far, any time her life had been in danger he'd managed to get to her in time. But would that always be the case?

Pushing the issue aside to deal with some other time, he bent his head down to her again. "Maybe... but let's talk about it tomorrow, hmm?"

Much later, Clark reluctantly loosened his hold on Lois. "Not that I want to let you go, but... it's getting late. Should I drive you home?"

Stirring, Lois's mouth curved into a smile. "I guess you'd fly home after, right? Though why you think I'm not capable of driving myself.... It's okay," she added quickly as Clark was about to protest. "I understand that you're trying to play the protective

boyfriend, and I sort of love that from you, you know? Though I'm not sure I always will...." She reached up and kissed him swiftly.

Returning to Clark's suggestion a few moments later, Lois murmured with a pout, "Do I have to go home? I'd much rather stay here with you."

He took a sharp intake of breath - did she mean what he thought she meant? "Umm... Lois, sure, you can stay if you want. But... well, after last time, I don't know how much I can... ah, that is...." He trailed off, knowing that he'd tied himself completely in knots, but finding that discussing the subject of intimacy with Lois was too awkward to allow him to articulate his real feelings. \*Was\* she saying she wanted to make love with him? And if she was, was he ready for it? He wasn't sure... but on the other hand, if she hadn't meant that she wanted to make love, he really wasn't sure either that he could take another night of lying beside her and just holding her. And the one thing he \*was\* sure about was that Lois hadn't meant that one of them should sleep on the couch.

Too concerned with his own reactions, he initially failed to notice that Lois was looking as embarrassed as he felt. Instantly jumping to conclusions once he did notice her reaction, he found his voice again. "Umm... Lois, you don't have to be afraid that I'm going to push you into anything you don't want. Really - if all you want is to cuddle, that's fine by me," he assured her awkwardly. He would just have to take a quick swim in the Arctic Sea once she'd gone to sleep, and another once they were ready to get up in the morning.

She gave him a wry smile in return. "Clark, it's not that I don't want to... I mean, I do, but I'm just... I guess I'm nervous. My... umm, past experiences haven't been brilliant, and after all, you're...." She swallowed, but didn't continue.

Clark grabbed her hand, his gaze not meeting hers. "Lois, however nervous you are you can't possibly be as nervous as I feel about this whole bed thing. I'm... I mean, I've never done it before," he finished on a rush.

Lois gasped and clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with shock as she stared at him in disbelief.

Clark saw her reaction and wished a hole could open up and swallow him; he'd confided his most intimate secret to the woman he loved and it looked like she considered him some kind of freak. Trying to decide whether to risk discussing it or whether he should simply insist on taking her home, the decision was taken out of his hands by his Super-hearing cutting in.

His abstraction was noticeable to Lois; she touched his arm to attract his attention. "Clark...? Someone needs Superman?"

He returned his attention to her reluctantly. "Yeah. A fire across town - the emergency broadcast says people are trapped."

"Go," she insisted. "I'll wait for you."

He shook his head. "You go on home. I'll see you tomorrow." He quickly got to his feet and spun into the Suit, but before he could



leave Lois had caught at his arm to detain him. She quickly reached up and kissed him hard, and even in spite of his need to get to the fire he couldn't prevent himself kissing her back.

"Later, Clark," were the final words he heard as he ran to his balcony and took off.

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Lois flopped back on Clark's sofa, allowing the impact of his confession to sink in. He was a \*virgin\*? Superman had never had sex?

Although, she reminded herself quickly, it was \*Clark\* who was inexperienced. She had figured out enough about her best friend's relationship with his alter ego to understand that he would never allow himself to go beyond a certain point in any interpersonal relationships as Superman. He had come very close to his private limit with her; but then, he'd been in love with her.

But Clark being a virgin was... very unexpected. Lois knew he'd had girlfriends before, but that he'd never slept with any of them was certainly a revelation. Okay, she had wondered about it before, the night he had slept in her bed, but she had afterwards decided that it was highly improbable. Well, it certainly meant he wouldn't have anything to compare her with; but on the other hand, he could still be disappointed. And she would give anything not to have that happen. She loved him far too much to lose him because of her deficiencies in bed.

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Clark was gone for almost an hour and in the meantime, to take her mind off their last conversation, she had been following his activities on the local late-night news programme on TV. He certainly looked splendid, flying in and out of the burning building carrying trapped civilians and, later, helping to extinguish the flames with judicious applications of freezing Super-breath.

It felt very strange to watch him and remember that this was \*Clark\* she was seeing; that the Super-hero she admired and loved so much was also the ordinary, gentle man who worked beside her and was her best friend. She had the best of both worlds with this man, she reflected. He would let her take advantage of his Super-powers, he had made that very clear, but they could also do the kind of things normal couples did, and which she certainly would not have been able to do with Superman. She loved spending lazy evenings in with Clark, or going to the movies together; the prospect of doing that as an established couple in future sounded just perfect.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a 'whoosh' and a low thump; he'd returned, she realised. Padding into the kitchen, she was just in time to see him change at Super-speed back into normal clothes, but he resisted her attempt to draw him into a hug.

"I reek of smoke, Lois," he told her abruptly. "I should take a shower." Before she could reply, he had disappeared into the bedroom.

Feeling rebuffed, Lois was about to return to the living-room to wait

for him, until she recalled the expression in his eyes as he'd stepped away from her and realised that it matched the way he'd looked immediately after he'd told her he was a virgin. He'd been hurt by her response to his confession, and it looked as if he was still hurting. It was hardly surprising - after all, he had told her something intensely private about himself, and her response had been... what? Shock? Incredulity? Scorn? - no, not the last, she insisted roughly, silently, but what if he'd thought so?

Making her decision, Lois walked purposefully into Clark's bedroom, sitting on the bed to wait for him.

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It had been a mistake to tell her about his lack of experience, Clark thought grimly as he showered, at normal speed since it allowed him to delay having to face her again. She'd shown all too clearly what she thought: she'd practically laughed in his face!

No, she hadn't, his conscience insisted. She'd been shocked, but that was probably to be expected - after all, what man got to the age of twenty-eight these days without being sexually experienced? But the thought of facing her was still embarrassing, even without wondering just where their relationship would go from this point - would she still want him?

A towel wrapped about his hips, he walked out to the bedroom to select some clean clothes - then stopped dead when he saw Lois sitting on his bed waiting for him.

She gave him a hesitant smile. "Clark - we need to talk about this."

"About what?" he threw back at her, knowing he was avoiding the issue, but unable to stop himself.

"About what you told me before you had to go," she told him. "Come on - you know we need to discuss this."

Looking away from her, he shrugged. "There's nothing to discuss. I told you... something... and you, uh, reacted. That's all there is to it." < \*Please\* drop it> he pleaded silently, just wanting to be on his own with his thoughts.

Lois stood up abruptly and came to stand in front of him, forcing him by her presence to look at her. "Clark, I'm sorry. I never meant you to think I thought there was anything wrong with you... your being a virgin. You waited for the right person, I guess. And, you know," she added, her soft brown eyes showing a brief flash of unhappiness, "I wish I'd waited too."

Clark frowned. "Lois...? What...?" What was this all about? He knew she was experienced; not that she'd really talked much about her past, but he was aware that she'd slept with a former colleague at the Planet. And hadn't she said there was history between her and Linda King which had involved a man?

"Oh, Clark, I've told you about my past relationships," she explained quickly, her voice full of regret. "'Federal disasters' isn't too much of an exaggeration. I... well, I guess they all found me a

disappointment."

Clark felt as if someone had struck him. Lois was unsure of her own sexuality? That was why she'd been nervous at the prospect of making love with him? And yet, in so many ways, she was the most unself-consciously attractive woman he had ever met. There was sexuality in so many of her gestures - unconscious, he guessed, given what she'd just told him.

He took a deep breath. It seemed they both had dragons to slay, and perhaps now was the right time.

He reached out and slid his hands up her arms to her shoulders, drawing her into the shelter of his embrace. "Shhh, sweetheart. You could never be a disappointment to me, Lois. I love you. I'll always love you. And we'll be great together, trust me."

She turned eyes bright with unshed tears up to him. "How can you be so sure, Clark? What if... what if I can't satisfy you?"

"What if I can't satisfy \*you\*?" He turned her question back at her.

She gasped in disbelief. "But... you're \*Superman,\* Clark - how could you not?"

"Easily, I guess," he replied. "I mean, I may have read hundreds of books on the subject, but I don't have any experience. You say you're nervous - well, I'm downright scared! But I \*want\* to make love with you."

"I want to make love with you, too, Clark," Lois whispered.

"Then let's do it." He bent, sliding one arm behind her knees, and lifted her into his arms, carrying her to the bed. As he laid her down, she reached up and ran her hand through his hair, caressing him. Kneeling beside her, he bent and kissed her lingeringly.

That kiss turned into several, and Lois pulled him down beside her, revelling in the sensation of his skin underneath her fingertips, the smoothness of his hairless chest, the muscularity of his frame. As her fingers traversed his chest once again, she felt her hand caught in his suddenly, and she raised her gaze to catch his brown eyes laughing at her.

"Not fair, Lois - you're still fully dressed!"

"Then do something about it," she told him huskily.

His hands reached for her sweatshirt, and she helped him pull it over her head; she saw the admiring, passionate expression in his eyes as he saw her upper torso, naked but for her lacy bra. She reached for his hand and brought it to rest on the edge of her breast. "Touch me, Clark," she whispered.

With shaking hands he did as she asked, each stroke making her want him more. Her own hands trailed over his body almost of their own volition, and shortly afterwards made contact with the edge of his towel, dislodging it. He hesitated momentarily, then in a decisive movement seized it and threw it to the floor. A few moments later she

helped him to remove her own remaining clothing.

"Lois... I meant to do this slowly!" he gasped as they clutched at each other, their mutual need making them impatient.

"Next time, Clark...we've got all night," she whispered, reaching to pull him down for another kiss.

"I love you," he gasped breathlessly as she urged him to the completion they both needed so badly.

"I love you too, Clark!" Lois cried against his mouth while around them the rest of the world seemed to fade away.

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"Well? Do I rate as another 'federal disaster'?" Clark asked some time later, as Lois lay across his chest with his arms securely around her. He didn't really have any fears about her answer; her little cries and pleas as they'd made love had assured him that he had succeeded in giving her pleasure. Just as she had given him pleasure... correction, the best experience of his life.

She stretched, her sensuous movements reminding Clark of the sleek actions of a cat, and smiled lazily up at him. "Let me think...." she teased, then squealed as he tickled her. "No! Clark... stop it!" Calming down a moment or two later, she smiled again. "Clark - you really don't need me to tell you how fantastic that was, do I?"

He grinned in return, trailing one hand over her creamy skin. "As long as I didn't disappoint you either."

"Are you joking?" She stared at him, wide-eyed. "You were \*wonderful\* - but, you know, I half-expected we'd end up floating on the ceiling or something."

Clark raised an eyebrow at her in an exaggerated gesture. "Your wish is my command, my dear," he growled, and suddenly they \*were\* floating.

Lois squealed in shock, clutching at him, but he laughed, assuring her that he wouldn't let her fall. "You're perfectly safe. I could support you up here with one finger, you know."

Grinning, her concerns forgotten, Lois retorted, "That presents interesting possibilities...." She began to trail one hand down his side and across his thigh.

His wicked expression made her laugh out loud. "Sure does, Lois - want to find out what kind of possibilities?"

"Maybe...."

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When Lois awoke in the morning, she felt disoriented; the room was unfamiliar, and the light streaming in through the window disconcerting. Then she remembered, and she stretched sensuously as she remembered making love with Clark. Several times, in fact; they just hadn't been able to get enough of each other. She had finally

fallen asleep in the small hours of the morning.

Turning her head to smile at her lover, she was taken aback to find herself alone in the bed. But before she could even start to wonder where Clark was, the bedroom door was pushed open and he walked in, carrying two mugs. Setting them down on the nightstand, he sat on the side of the bed and bent to kiss her.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked softly. "Sorry I wasn't here - I had to go out."

Lois recognised the 'out' as meaning that Superman had been required. Reaching up her hand to stroke Clark's face, she smiled warmly at him. "I feel wonderful, thanks to you. Who needed you?"

He shrugged. "Nothing much - an overturned truck on the freeway. I was able to set it upright and get it out of the way."

Lois allowed her eyes to trail over him, clad as he was in T-shirt and jeans. "Not coming back to bed?" she asked in mock disappointment, a mischievous light in her eyes.

He stared at her, shaking his head in amused surprise. "You're insatiable, woman!"

"That's what you do to me," she growled at him, trailing her fingers over his denim-clad thigh. He caught at her hand, holding it firmly, then bent to kiss her thoroughly.

Some time later, with Clark's hair thoroughly untidy and his T-shirt decidedly crumpled, Lois looked him up and down and grinned. "You know, we're never going to be able to convince anyone at work that we're just friends!"

Clark grinned in response, but then his expression turned serious. "Why should we? Okay, I know it might be fun to keep this to ourselves for a while, but you know, this isn't just a casual fling. I *love* you. I want us to be together, and I don't care who knows it. And if I feel like touching you or kissing you when we're at work, then I want to be able to do it."

Lois considered the implications of that for a few moments. They'd be gossiped about; but then, they would probably be gossiped about whatever they said or didn't say. Their relationship had been the subject of speculation before, only for that to get scuppered when she'd become engaged to Lex Luthor; and of course there had always been speculation about her relationship with Superman. Why should she be concerned about their colleagues knowing that she and Clark were dating? She *loved* Clark. He was special, and suddenly she realised that she wanted everyone to know it.

"Yes - let's tell people we're together," she told him immediately. "I'm proud to be your girlfriend, and I want people to know it."

"Hey - not as proud as I am to be your boyfriend!" Clark instantly replied, hugging her closely.

A few moments later he gave her a thoughtful look, as if he was trying to decide whether or not to say something. Lois prodded his

chest. "Come on, Kent - out with it!"

Clark gave her an exaggerated leer, deliberately misinterpreting her words, before becoming serious again. "I was just wondering whether to say... what the heck, I guess I'd rather have this out in the open."

"Go on," Lois prompted, curious.

"Well... I love you, you know that. And making love last night - that makes it even more of a commitment where I'm concerned. But...." He hesitated, then seemed to gain determination from an intake of breath. "Lois - I want to marry you. But before you say anything, I'm \*not\* going to propose now, or even any time soon. You... it's too soon since your engagement...." He swallowed, watching her as he spoke, unsure of how she would respond.

But she reached out to grab his hand. "Clark - you know, I somehow knew that's what you'd want!" Just how she'd known that, Lois wasn't sure; perhaps it was Clark's small-town values and the influence of his parents' successful marriage. But how did she feel about it? She considered for a moment, testing out the prospect of marrying \*Clark.\* Could she even contemplate facing another wedding, much as she loved him? Then she smiled. He was right - it wasn't something they had to deal with right now.

"You're right," she told him softly. "I think I'd like to be married to you. But it's barely been a couple of months, and I don't want to jump into another engagement. It's not because of what anyone might say, believe me!" she assured him. "I just...."

"Hey, it's okay, I understand," Clark interrupted. "And I won't push you. As long as I know you love me, I can wait as long as you want."

Lois nodded, a lump forming in her throat as she recognised again just how well Clark understood her, and how far he was prepared to go to reassure her. "Yeah. And, you know, when we do decide to take that step, maybe we'll forget about an engagement and just do it, huh?"

He smiled warmly. "Sure. How about a country wedding - in Smallville? Maybe in about five years' time," he teased her.

"Sounds wonderful," she enthused, smiling at the man she loved more than she could ever have believed she was capable of loving anyone. Okay, five years sounded just a little excessive, but they could talk about it again - maybe \*she\* might propose to \*him\* instead, in a few weeks' time, perhaps.

As he leaned towards her, drawing her to him for another deeply passionate kiss, she wrapped her arms around Clark and thanked her lucky stars, or whoever was watching over her, for sending this man to her. He had taught her how to laugh and to love; he had healed her wounds and given her back her life.

And as long as he loved her, her life would be complete.

- The End -

End  
file.